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Choice

SMART TV
How LG's new
tech raises
the bar



Focal Dimension
The soundbar with
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Sonic sensations!

Pioneer AV amp and
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explosive audio

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Morel 5.1 sub/sat system
Samsung 40in LED TV
Mede8er media player
JBL wireless speaker

**Demo
screen!**

Blu-ray discs
that really test
your system



Group test

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INSIDE BEHIND THE SCENES AT BANG & OLUFSEN → TOP TEN GEAR GUIDE
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Full-bodied TV audio, p38

WELCOME

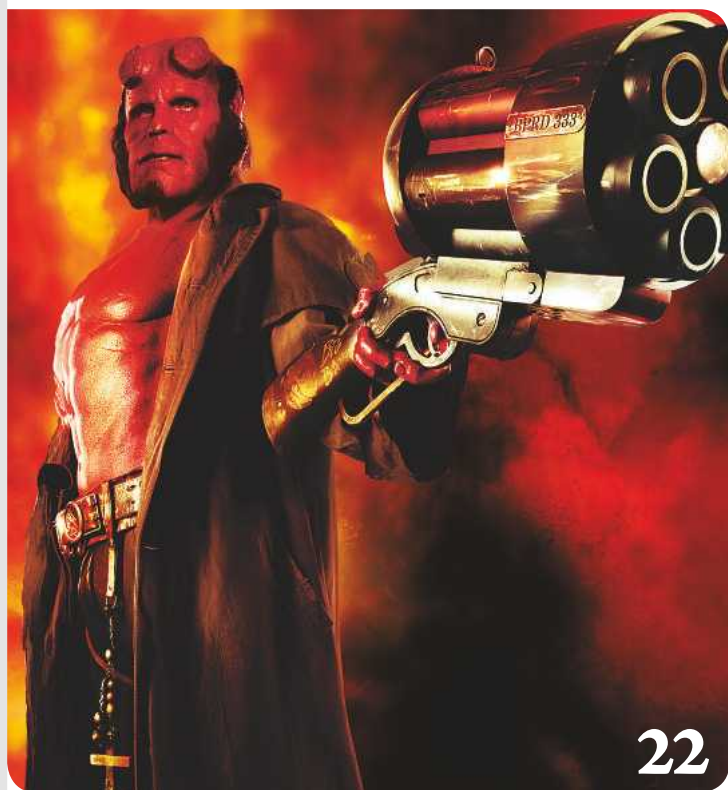
Sony's flagship TV, the KD-65X9005B, is a stunner – not least because its razor-sharp visuals are joined by a powerful speaker array that puts some welcome excitement back into flatscreen TV audio. Sound, of course, is a vital part of the home cinema experience, and while 4K is the buzz topic in AV circles right now, I'm equally excited by the way **manufacturers are striving to meet our domestic sonic needs**. Soundbars and soundbases may cause some die-hard film fans to raise their eyebrows, but they provide a simple path towards an authentic level of performance, particularly models as advanced as Focal's Dimension (see p48). Alternatively, traditional AVRs like Pioneer's VSX-924 (p42) are catering for modern demands – by offering the likes of Bluetooth, Wi-Fi and app control – without ignoring their main multichannel purpose. And in the coming months, we will likely see next-gen sound formats like Dolby Atmos and Auro 3D ushered into living rooms. The future? It sounds good!



Mark Craven
Editor



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The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



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STAND TOGETHER
OR FACE EXTINCTION

A MICHAEL BAY FILM

TRANSFORMERS

AGE OF EXTINCTION

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BULLETIN

→ **News Highlights** KEF Next-gen Reference speakers revealed **SONY** Mid-range STR-DN1050 receiver has Hi-Res Audio in its DNA **PHILIPS** Ambilight celebrates 10th birthday **DRACONIAN DAYS** Documenting the history of movie censorship **NEWS X10** The hottest stories in bite-size chunks **THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2** Superhero swings onto BD and DVD **AND MUCH MORE!**

Audio ambitions

Cambridge Audio Azur 751R V2 → www.cambridgeaudio.com



Cambridge Audio used the High End Show in Munich to debut this upgraded AV receiver. Due to hit shelves in July priced around £1,600, the heavyweight Azur 751R V2 claims 120W into each of its seven channels and totes 6-in, 2-out HDMI connectivity with 4K passthrough. On the audio side, features include an asynchronous USB input for 24-bit/192kHz playback, an acoustically-damped all-metal chassis and ATF upsampling. 'We always ensure our AVRs deliver the same audio performance levels as our award-winning stereo amplifiers,' boasts CA.

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Pillars of power

KEF Reference Series → www.kef.com



It's been a while since KEF refreshed its Reference series of speakers, but our initial impression is that it was worth the wait. Sporting a new, modern design and enhanced driver tech, these ultra-high-end cabinets seem set to stun.

Each speaker is built around the latest iteration of KEF's Uni-Q 'point source' driver array, utilising a 1in vented

aluminium dome tweeter placed at the centre of a 5in midrange driver, and the 6.5in bass driver is an all-new design, too. Prices range from £4,000 for the subwoofer to £10,500 for a pair of the Reference 5 floorstanders. They come in three standard wood finishes, plus two 'Kent Engineering and Foundry' special editions at an extra cost.

Cabasse upgrades



French audio specialist Cabasse unveiled a new 96kHz version of its range-topping La Sphère loudspeaker system at the recent Munich High End Show. The revamped style icon is supplied with a processor designed for use with high-res 96kHz files and packs a new 500W power amplifier, the Cabasse BC REF500. This, claims the manufacturer, has been developed specifically to increase the dynamic capacities of the mid and treble section of the co-axial four-way speaker system. www.cabasse.com/en

Finlux extends range



Direct retailer Finlux hopes to continue to make a name for itself at the more affordable end of the television market with the latest additions to its line-up. Boasting a 'super narrow' 3mm bezel, the Super Screen 9076-T range consists of two Full HD 3D models – the £900 47F9076-T and £1,200 55F9076-T. The two new TVs are also Skype-enabled (with the addition of a Finlux Skype camera), provide access to popular apps such as Netflix and BBC iPlayer, and come with a free Wi-Fi dongle. www.finluxdirect.com

Bluetooth speaker



July sees the release of JVC's latest portable Bluetooth speaker. Available in a choice of black, white and red finishes, the SP-ABT30 will retail for around £180 and utilises a built-in passive radiator, in addition to a trio of drivers, to improve low-frequency performance. The SP-ABT30 also offers NFC technology for easy Smart device connection and features a trio of listening modes – Stereo, Enhanced Stereo (creating a wider sound field) and 360-Degree Sound. Battery life is rated at 10 hours. www.jvc.co.uk



AVR has Hi-Res Audio DNA

New STR-DN1050 is our best ever mid-range AV receiver, says Sony

Sony has unveiled a feature-packed mid-range AV receiver, hailing it as its most ambitious yet. The £500 STR-DN1050 sports a number of trickle-down refinements, both in terms of construction and performance, which Sony sound guru Eric Kingdon believes make it the brand's best yet.

'To be honest it was very difficult to improve on 2013's STR-DN1040,' he told *HCC* at the product unveil, held at the cutting-edge Wisseloord recording studios in the Netherlands. 'It was hard work – and a bit of luck. Like anything, when something suddenly comes together and sounds just right there is an element of luck. That's part of the human process of making something...'

The incoming STR-DN1050 is a 7.1-channel design, rated at 165W per channel. Although it lacks Sony's prestigious High Res Audio branding, Kingdon says it is compatible in everything but name. The receiver can play DSD and 192kHz/24-bit WAV and FLAC files from across a network or USB; or direct from a dedicated High Res Audio separate such as Sony's HAP-Z1ES HDD player.

In addition to 4K-passthrough HDMI, the receiver has two MHL compatible inputs – 'You can have your smartphone linked up to it and a Chromecast if you want,' suggests Kingdon. To further stress its



Eric Kingdon: 'It was very difficult to improve on 2013's STR-DN1040 receiver. It was hard work – and a bit of luck'

streaming credentials, the amp offers integrated Wi-Fi and apt-X Bluetooth connectivity, as well as Apple AirPlay support and NFC.

There's also a raft of music apps onboard, including Spotify, Deezer and 'net radio.

Precision engineering

It's not just the feature roster that has been bolstered. The STR-DN1050's fundamental circuitry has also been tweaked. 'The micro controllers, digital circuits and the audio parts all now have their own voltage regulators,' reveals Kingdon. 'That means the current delivered to those key parts of the amplifier circuit is very succinct, very short and quick. Consequently the noise level is lower and timing errors have been reduced.'

Interestingly, Sony's engineering team have borrowed the digital timing and crystal control circuits from the award-winning STR-DA5800ES receiver, for extra polish.

Sony also announced a cheaper 7.1 sibling AVR, the STR-DR850, which will retail for £400.

PLAYLIST...

Team *HCC* spins up its disc picks of the month

Pacific Rim 3D (All-region BD)

The recent *Godzilla* remake sent us scurrying back to the 3D delights of Guillermo del Toro's action-packed nod to Japanese monster movies.



Another Day, Another Time (Region B BD)



This star-studded folk concert is a must for anyone who fell under the spell of *Inside Llewyn Davis* – and it sounds utterly sublime on Blu-ray.

The Beast Within (Region B BD/R2 DVD)



This schlocky early '80s monster movie receives lavish treatment on Blu-ray, including a first-rate restoration and loads of extras.

The Trip to Italy (R2 DVD)



Rob Brydon and Steve Coogan hit the road again for more meals and hilarious impersonations.

Venture Bros: Season 5 (All-region BD)



With no word on a UK release for this cult cartoon, it's a good job the recent US Blu-ray is import-friendly.

EXTRAS...

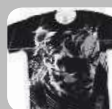
Small items that could make a big impression

Film Noir: 100 All-Time Favourites



Weighing in at almost 700 pages, TASCHEN's £35 hardback charts the history of the film noir genre from *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* to *Drive*, and is lavishly illustrated.

Metal Gear Solid: Big Boss T-Shirt



Show your love for Hideo Kojima's hit game franchise with this officially licenced (and extremely stylish) *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes* T-shirt from Level Up Wear. Yours for £20.

Godzilla: The Art of Destruction



Packed with concept art and detailed info on the filmmaking process, Titan's handsome £30 hardback provides a detailed account of the production of the recent blockbuster remake.

Zombie Gnomes



Give your garden an undead makeover with one of these terracotta terrors. Two models are available (one standing, one crawling), priced £15 each, from www.red5.co.uk.

A decade of Philips' Ambilight

TV brand celebrates with World Cup-centric Ambilight app

Philips' Ambilight technology is 10 years old this year, and shows no sign of running out of innovative steam. New for Summer 2014 is an app that allows the brand's illuminating flatscreens to enliven the World Cup with some bespoke ambience.

The company claims the app, available for Android and iOS devices, makes 'watching football with friends even better.' It works with all Ambilight TVs launched from 2011 onwards, with the exception of this year's 5200 models.

The app allows football fanatics to select their country's national flag, and thus surround their Ambilight TV with the national colours. In-game incidents, such as yellow cards and goals, result in snazzy light shows.

While Ambilight first appeared on Philips' LCD TVs in 2004, using CCFL lamps on the left and right edges to mirror onscreen content, the idea was born two years earlier. A brainstorming session amongst Philips' Lighting and Consumer Electronics team threw up the idea of using light to improve the telly-watching experience.

A demo of the technology followed in 2003, before the product launch a year later. Since then, it has proven a success story for the brand, evolving from CCFL to LED in 2007, and upping the number of sides from two to four on its high-end models.

Most recently, it has become part of the Hue lighting system, enabling an Ambilight TV to work in conjunction with a whole-house lighting array.

Ambilight isn't entirely about adding glamour, of course. The technology has, says Philips, been proven to reduce eye fatigue – and,

The Ambilight app recreates your country's national flag



surprisingly, household energy bills: '87 per cent of consumers usually change their room lighting conditions when watching TV with Ambilight on,' we're told. 'Most often by switching off all lights.'

Cut-throat competition

Yet it's not all celebrations for UK Ambilight fans in 2014. The company recently announced the screens confirmed for retailers on these shores, and they currently top out at the 7809 models – leaving the 8000 series a premium treat for buyers in mainland Europe. Perhaps Philips feels its high-end sets face an uphill task in a UK TV market known for its ruthless price wars? The good news is that the TVs that are available are competitive, with the likes of its 55in 6609 mode selling for around £1,200.

Philips' 55PFS6609 is keenly priced



Turn your Playbar into a soundbase

Accessories specialist adds even greater flexibility to Sonos' premium soundbar

Flexson has introduced four new mounting solutions for the Sonos Playbar aimed at helping owners integrate it into their AV setup. As well as a trio of bespoke wall-mounts, the company is offering a stand that promises to transform the soundbar into a soundbase (of sorts).

Priced at £100, the Flexson TV Stand for Playbar (pictured) is a sturdy-looking plinth built to hold the soundbar and support a flatscreen TV. The company claims that the 8.7cm-high steel frame is capable of supporting TVs weighing up to 50Kg, and that its surface area (90cm x 30cm) is large enough to accommodate 'almost any size of pedestal'.

Flexson sales and marketing manager David Cain claims the product is a direct response to popular demand from both retailers and Sonos users.

Bespoke wall-mounts

The company's new wall-mount solutions are designed to hold both a flatscreen TV and a Playbar. The £300 Cantilever Mount can be rotated to face the viewer, or if you already have a cantilever bracket, the £90 Screen Mount will attach to it. Finally, the £150 Flat to Wall Mount is a slim, stationary bracket.

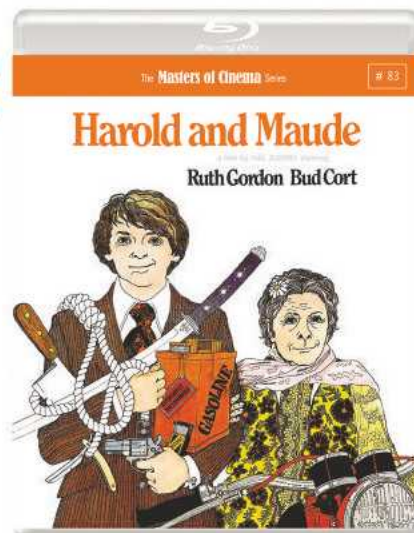
Sonos users have demanded a soundbase-style mount, apparently



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DIARY

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

→ JUNE

30: Ride Along

The hit comedy starring Ice Cube and Kevin Hart comes to DVD and Blu-ray. Exclusive extras on the latter include an alternate ending, deleted scenes and four featurettes.
www.universalpictures.co.uk

→ JULY

04: How to Train Your Dragon 2

The bigscreen adventures of Hiccup and Toothless continue in this highly anticipated sequel to DreamWorks' 2010 animated blockbuster. Catch it in 3D or 2D at your local cinema.
www.fox.co.uk

**10: Transformers: Age of Extinction**

Director Michael Bay returns to the toy-tastic sci-fi franchise and is joined by Mark Wahlberg and the Dinobots for this fourth film in the series. In UK cinemas from today.

www.paramountpictures.co.uk

11: CEDIA Region 1 Awards

The UK's custom install industry will be downing tools and putting on its glad rags to attend this prestigious awards ceremony celebrating the very best in the business.
www.cediaawards.org

16: Porky's

The legendary US sex comedy makes its debut on Blu-ray in the UK joined by some seriously risqué extras. And to make it even more tempting, Arrow is releasing a limited edition with Steelbook packaging. Phwoar!
www.arrowfilms.co.uk

17: Dawn of the Planet of the Apes

Get your hands on those 'damned dirty apes' once again as this action-packed sequel to 2011's *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* pits man against monkey in a multiplex near you.
www.fox.co.uk

21: The LEGO Movie

The year's biggest animated smash makes its bow on DVD, Blu-ray and 3D Blu-ray. Everything is awesome? It is now.
www.warnerbros.com

24: HCC #237

The next issue of your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and in-depth software reviews.
www.homecinemachoice.com

INTERVIEW

Strike up the banned

Director **Jake West** tells Anton van Beek about his latest documentary, *Video Nasties: The Definitive Guide Part Two – Draconian Days...*

Your previous documentary covered the original 'video nasties' scare in the UK. So what does *Draconian Days* have in store for viewers?

Draconian Days is designed as a direct continuation of the story from where *Video Nasties: The Definitive Guide – Moral Panic, Censorship and Videotape* left off. This one picks up the baton from the enacting of the VRA (Video Recordings Act) in 1984 and runs up to the strange story regarding James Ferman's dismissal as the head of the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification) in 1999.

This covers some of the anomalies in the way censorship was handled. You had various things that Ferman himself didn't like, such as throwing stars and nunchaku, as well as his outright refusal to allow *The Exorcist* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* to even be considered for release on video. He just wasn't very consistent and had a bit of a class-based agenda as well.

Even at the time, while I didn't agree with a lot of what he was doing, I still found Ferman to be a fascinating character...

Absolutely. And it's important to get across to people that the film isn't a character assassination on Ferman. He actually emerges as a very contradictory character. He was very intelligent and had to deal with a lot of pressure from both sides of the argument. People on the pro-censorship lobby thought he was far too soft, while people who wanted the mass availability of everything weren't happy either.

To his credit, in the mid-'90s when it came to fighting the



Jake West's (right) new documentary uncovers the truth behind the hysterical newspaper headlines



tighter controls proposed by the Alton amendment [which came about in the wake of allegations linking the film *Child's Play 3* to the murder of James Bulger], Ferman really got involved and was the voice of reason. And then there was his eventual demise due to trying to legalise pornography. It was such a bizarre end to his career.

Thankfully he was never shy about giving interviews either.

Ferman was a bit of an egotist for sure. He put himself front and centre of the BBFC. But because of this we were lucky enough to get hold of a very long archival interview with him. Because despite him being dead, we really wanted him to have a voice in the film. Again, we weren't trying to trash him. We just wanted to understand what happened back in that period.

Being born in 1975 and growing up as a horror fan, *Draconian Days* brought back a lot of fond memories of trawling classified ads and film fairs for uncut films.

Yeah, and I can reveal to you that we're going to have even more of the old home movie footage from film fairs on the DVD. There's about an hour of it that we're

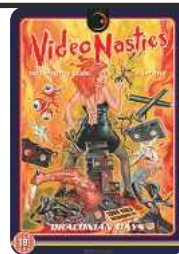
going to put as a little hidden Easter Egg somewhere.

One of the things we found during the Q&A after the film's premiere at FrightFest Glasgow was that so many people in the audience have their own stories about what happened to them at the time. So I think this doc, probably even more than the first, is really going to speak to fans about their experiences.

The censorship of the time threatened to criminalise fans, forcing them to break the law, whether by importing tapes or getting hold of dubs. When you see that footage of the poor bloke in the film who worked for British Rail and was hit by a dawn raid to confiscate his collection, you can see he's just a normal enthusiast, not somebody trying to dismantle society. It was like some kind of awful, Orwellian, right-wing state.

But the upside of this is that it fostered these great communities and networks of horror fans that still have echoes today in FrightFest and other festivals around the country. That's actually the positive side of the story as far as I'm concerned.

Video Nasties: The Definitive Guide Part Two – Draconian Days is available to buy on DVD from July 14th



This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 Made in Manhattan

Freesat has confirmed that long-term partner Manhattan Technology intends to manufacture a new line of Freetime set-top boxes. 'Freetime puts Manhattan at the cutting-edge of the UK television industry and we look forward to releasing a full range of high-performance Freetime receivers and recorders, all with integrated Wi-Fi,' confirmed Manhattan Technology Ltd. Chairman and CEO Abbas Arbab-Zadeh.

2 Testing 4K

Satellite operator Eutelsat has taken its first step towards the era of Ultra HD broadcasting with the debut of a 4K test channel. The demo channel can be found in the Hot Bird 13° East region (covering Europe, the Middle East and Africa North) and can be picked up by HEVC-compliant second-gen Ultra HD TVs with a DVB-S2 satellite tuner.

3 Courting controversy

Some shocking news last month came courtesy of Arrow Video, which revealed that the BBFC had passed Jörg Buttgerit's highly controversial horror *Nekromantic* uncensored for release in the UK. While the film had never actually been banned, no distributor had ever bothered formally submitting it to the board as there was no belief that it would be passed. *Nekromantic* is currently on target to hit Blu-ray this September.

4 AMX acquired!

Harman International has acquired home automation and control specialist AMX in a deal said to be worth \$365m. The brand will join Harman's existing portfolio of AV companies, including JBL, AKG Acoustics, Crown Audio, Infinity Systems and Lexicon.

5 Arthouse VOD revamped

Curzon Cinemas has relaunched its arthouse video-on-demand service. In addition to revamping the Curzon Home Cinema site with additional content, including exclusively curated seasons of films and online festivals, the service has been added to Freesat Freetime.

6 Partnership rewarded

Samsung Electronics (UK) Ltd. and the British Museum scooped the Long Term Partnership Award at the 35th annual Arts & Business Awards. The award was presented in recognition of Samsung's Digital Discovery Centre at the British Museum, which was commended for 'inspiring the community' and attracting over 40,000 visitors in its first four years.

7 Ultra HD recorder hits Japan

Sharp has launched its first Ultra HD recorder in Japan to tie-in with the arrival of the first native 4K trial broadcasts from local TV companies. The Sharp Aquos TU-UD1000 retails for around ¥120,000 (approximately £700) and features a 1TB hard disk capable of storing around 53 hours of 4K video. Given the lack of 4K content available here, the company has no plans for a UK release at present. Boo.

8 Beats bought

Apple has expanded its tech empire with the recent purchase of Beats Electronics, maker of the ever-popular range of headphones. The \$3billion deal also includes the Beats Music streaming service, while Beats co-founders Jimmy Iovine and Dr. Dre have also joined Apple.

9 Spotify hits new heights

Online music streaming service Spotify has passed another couple of milestones. Not only has the service passed the 10 million mark for paid subscribers, but it has also managed to accumulate over 40 million active users worldwide.

10 Norse show slashes its way to the top on Amazon

The blood-soaked finale to the second season of the critically-acclaimed historical action series *Vikings* has become the most watched show to date on Amazon Prime Instant Video UK. However, while Amazon is keen to talk up the hundreds of five-star reviews the show has garnered on the site, it has been noticeably reticent in providing actual viewing figures for the Amazon Prime-exclusive series.



Vikings: A hit with Amazon's VOD gang

LOADING...

Team HCC's pick of the hottest BD and DVD news

Biblical blockbuster

Paramount has announced that it will be bringing Darren Aronofsky's religious blockbuster *Noah* to DVD and BD on July 28. Bonus features are expected to consist of a trio of *Making of...* featurettes.

Damn fine BD boxset



CBS Home Entertainment has confirmed that *Twin Peaks: The Entire Mystery* will be hitting Blu-ray in the US on July 29. In addition to new restorations of every episode with DTS-HD MA 7.1 audio, the 10-disc set also includes *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*. Making it even more of a must-have for fans, among the set's many extras will be nearly 90 minutes of deleted and alternate scenes from the film.

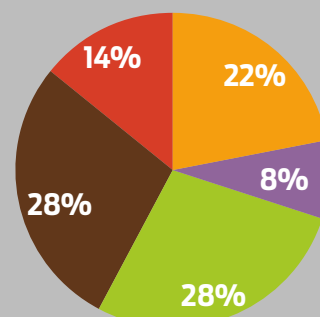
Date change for 'Burbs

Arrow Video has had to push back its Blu-ray release of *The 'Burbs* to August 25th to accommodate its work on the new restoration and the help of director Joe Dante in sourcing additional extra features.

WE ASKED...

What size is the TV in your bedroom?

■ I don't have one
 ■ Below 24in
 ■ Between 24in and 32in
 ■ Between 33in and 42in
 ■ Larger than 42in



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Swinging success

The Amazing Spider-Man 2 → Sony Pictures → All-region BD/R2 DVD

Looking for an action blockbuster to enjoy on your system? Then click the 'pre-order' button for Spider-Man's latest cinematic adventure, which hits DVD, Blu-ray and 3D Blu-ray on September 1. Not content with offering up a triple-dose of superhero spectacle as the web-headed hero faces off against three of his most fearsome foes (Electro, Rhino and Green Goblin), Sony Pictures has announced that the two HD versions will pack over 90 minutes of extras – including the exclusive *The Wages of Heroism: Making The Amazing Spider-Man 2* doc.



Mr Scott, energize! Who says you can't fly in an armchair: **the Excite 5.1 system.** All there is.



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sparkling highs and
punchy bass depth'



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The premium Danish brand has a reputation for smart design, and **John Archer** discovers that its debut 4K TV promises to turn heads thanks to some innovative automation tricks



Bang & Olufsen's poetry in motion



L-R: B&O sound expert ('tonmeister') Geoff Martin, senior R&D manager Ben Verbraak and core business strategy VP Michael Langager are all confident that the Avant TV is set to impress high-end consumers

INVITES TO B&O product launches always come with an aura of mystery attached. It was therefore no surprise when the luxury brand asked us to visit its headquarters in Struer, Denmark, while refusing to tell us what we were going to see. The most we deduced was that whatever was being unveiled would be a) of interest to us and b) a quintessential B&O product. And both these promises proved emphatically true.

After rolling up in glorious sunshine at a posh countryside hotel outside Struer, I was ushered into a cavernous presentation room flaunting a row of previous B&O TVs ranged down the side and a sheet-covered monolith lurking at the far end. Closer inspection of the older TVs on show revealed that they were various generations of B&O's much-lauded Avant TV series. This made it obvious that I was here to see the birth of a new Avant – but I admit I wasn't prepared for the details of what lay beneath the sheet...

Moving pictures

Emerging from a near two-year development cycle of the sort only B&O's premium business model can afford to devote to a single product, the Avant is, in the words of Michael Langager, B&O's Vice President of Core Business: 'The TV that moves – emotionally as well as physically.'

What this means in more prosaic terms is that when you turn the new Avant on or off you get to witness a variety of spectacular moving elements, the specifics of which depend on which of the multiple mounting options you're using. The showpiece Avant mount is, without doubt, the floorstand option, which places the TV on an aluminium pole fixed – off centre – to a motorised circular base. When you fire the TV up the pole rotates gracefully round and

forward on the circular base while the TV pivots separately on top of the pole. And at the same time, mesmerisingly, a set of speakers slide first down from the TV's bottom edge before telescoping out to left and right in sync with the picture opening out across the screen. There's so much going on that you don't really know where to look next – but you certainly never tire of looking.

It's not just the amount of motorisation that's startling; it's also the quality of the mechanics. There's not a squeak, screech, clunk, thud, whine or rattle to be heard. 'It's taken 89 years to create movement this beautiful,' explained Langager, indicating that B&O sees the Avant as the ultimate expression of its brand focus.

The idea of the rotating pole stand and neck is that it lets you rotate the TV flat to your wall when you're not using it and back out to face you when you are, and the ability

ONCE BITTEN...
Wolf of Wall Street bares its hi-def teeth on Blu-ray, p98

to rotate the TV on its neck also lets you turn the screen around to suit different seating positions via the remote. Yes, the speakers could have been left permanently protruding from the TV's bottom edge rather than gliding in and out, but, well, if you've got it, flaunt it.

If you opt for the desktop or wall mounts for the Avant, you'll still get to see some dance moves; for instance, with the desktop stand the TV lifts and tilts when you switch it on. No wonder that Jakob Grabaek, B&O's Technology Specialist in Product Architecture, describes the new Avant as 'the biggest project B&O has ever done.'

The David Lewis Avant design takes a full 360-degree approach too, with a rear panel created using a



The Avant's 3.1 driver array can be expanded via its onboard processor and B&O's wireless speakers

The floorstand mounting option features a motorised base and pole

THE BATTLE FOR THE HIGH-END

Who's challenging B&O for its premium TV position?

Samsung



The UK's most popular TV brand (in terms of sales) offers products for the mass market, but keeps an eye on premium buyers too, most notably with its 85in 4K screen – the S9 – that ships with an easel stand and £35,000 price tag.

LG

Another Korean corp that marries a focus on the entry-level market with a sideline in high-end displays. LG offers a brace of OLED models – one curved, the other sporting a 'Gallery' framed design – and prices start at £3,000.

Philips

With its Ambilight and 21:9 TVs, the Dutch company has long been ploughing its own flatscreen furrow, and its current range is topped by the Designline models that use a translucent glass stand to create a 'floating TV' effect.

multi-layered design with aluminium highlights to hide all venting, screws, cabling, and socketry. There's even a hidden bay for slotting in an Apple TV box.

And, yes, the remote for the new Avant is a work of art, sculpted from polished aluminium with a surprisingly minimal button layout and an achingly beautiful LED display.

Ultra HD debutant

Away from the Avant's exterior to what's going on inside, there's a surprise given the TV's lengthy development process: it uses a native 4K panel. That B&O should have seen 4K as becoming a pretty much essential technology on a 2014 premium TV says much about the new 'eyes forward' approach that seems to have emerged since Tue Mantoni took over as the company's CEO in 2011.

This 4K resolution is tied to a new version of B&O's Vision Clear system, designed in the words of B&O's Senior R&D Manager Ben Verbraak to deliver 'perfect pictures no matter what the source or viewing conditions. It's continually adaptive. You don't have to adjust the TV all the time.' It achieves this by analysing both the content of the source images and, uniquely, both the amount and the colour tone of the light in your room. This latter data is received through a large sensor protruding from the Avant's top edge.

First impressions of this system in action are impressive – especially the subtlety with which the picture makes its adjustments and the naturalism of the colour palette even when the screen is compensating for very bright conditions. I did sometimes feel as if the screen's 4K pictures weren't as detailed-looking as some rivals' – but to be fair, this could be down to the characteristics of the limited 4K demo material I was shown.

Not surprisingly those gliding speakers have a major part to play in the new Avant's unequivocally premium nature. In fact, if anything it's here where that classic B&O 'seal' is most obvious. As B&O's self-proclaimed 'Tonmeister' Geoff Martin puts it:

'We have a joke here that we don't make TVs; we make active speakers with something on top of them.'

For starters, the TV employs a built-in 3.1 configuration, with left, right and centre speakers below the screen and a potent 6.5in woofer on the rear. All these speakers are active, driven by an impressive 240W of amplification.

And that's just the start. The new Avant also sports a built-in surround processor capable of driving an astonishing 21 output channels, eight of them wireless if you wish.

The sound produced by the new Avant during a demo of *Gravity* was spellbinding. Even using just its integrated speakers, it produced a soundstage of stunning power, range and clarity that had no trouble dominating the huge demo room. With extra external speakers added – I lost count of exactly how many of these there were – the Avant produced the sort of audio that will impress both hi-fi aficionados and movie fans; offering copious detail, immaculate effects placement and amounts of raw power that might have been scary if I wasn't enjoying them so much.

Surprisingly affordable?

Couple the B&O marque with everything it's got going on and you're probably imagining a truly stratospheric price for the new Avant. Actually, though, it starts at £6,000 – expensive, yes, but not as eye-watering as I expected.

I do have concerns, however. The TV's HDMI inputs only meet the v1.4 standard rather than the more up-to-date 2.0 version best suited to 4K at high frame rates. Neither can it decode Netflix's 4K streams. 'We haven't built this in as we feel things are changing too fast,' claims Verbraak. 'Our view is that it's better to use external [third-party] boxes for such sources.'

Yet while these feature oversights could put off future-proofers, I'd suggest they see – and hear – the Avant in action ■



The Avant's Vision Clear engine adjusts its pictures to compensate for ambient light



“BARNSTORMER”

SVS SB-2000 Active Sub



“ installation is simple...authentic weight and punch...rich and inviting...omnipotent low-end thud...seriously impressive... cinematic scale and presence...for the asking price, SVS's SB-2000 provides hair-raising levels of low-frequency fun. ”

Mark Craven, Home Cinema Choice, April 2014



A great demo sequence can help separate a good speaker system – or hi-def display – from a mediocre one. Members of **Team HCC** reveal the discs they use when auditioning new kit

HELLBOY 2: THE GOLDEN ARMY

Hellboy Vs the Elemental

Guillermo del Toro is lauded for his baroque, inventive visuals, but his movies are often a master-class in sound design, too. Nowhere is this more evident than in 2008's *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*.

Best of all is the scene where Hellboy battles an Elemental, an enormous plant unleashed by Prince Nuada. After Nuada tosses a bean down the drain, there's a moment's silence before the Elemental bursts from the ground (58:04). This is a superb test of your speakers' ability to handle dynamic shifts – the sudden explosion should sound fast and aggressive, jolting you out of your seat.

The Forest God rises up, sending cars plummeting to the ground in a flurry of crisp tinkling glass and heavy bass thumps, then sends out a piercing roar (59:13) that can sound harsh on poor systems. It then crushes a car with its tentacle – revealing more about your speakers' detail reproduction – and hurls it at a helicopter. The chopper gives out a high-pitched wheeze that can also sound terrible through dodgy drivers.

Dynamic multichannel mayhem is what this *Hellboy* sequence is all about



When the Elemental stomps down the street and Hellboy hops from car to car (59:48) your subwoofer steps up to the plate. It should make the footsteps sound deep and taut, conveying the size and scale of this towering beast. Listen out for bloatedness and overhang – and for the panicked voices emerging across the soundstage. At 1:00:12, a car rolls down the road, moves from the front right speaker to the rear right, demonstrating your system's tonal uniformity and the quality of your receiver's steering.

The breathtaking battle is over at 1:02:41 when Hellboy delivers a killer blow to the Forest God's head. The gunshot should possess top-end bite and slam in the low frequencies. **DP**





HARRY POTTER & THE DEATHLY HALLOWS PART 2

Voldemort harasses Hogwarts

The whole of this Blu-ray feels like it was deliberately designed to give TVs and projectors a hard time. But there's one sequence in particular I return to frequently, beginning exactly at the start of Chapter 12 (45:52).

It starts with a high aerial shot at night showing Voldemort's army on a hilltop. Or at least that's what it's supposed to show; some TVs' black level response is so bad you'll struggle to see any information in this image at all.

The camera circles around, providing a stiff test of a screen's motion resolution and anti-judder processing. It's common to see smearing, softness, judder and blocky, flickery motion processing artefacts in this shot.

The intense darkness also highlights any problems an LCD TV might have with backlight clouding (areas of the picture that look unnaturally brighter than others). Soon after this opening shot, bright spells are fired at Hogwarts, creating a sudden shift in brightness that can cause poor-quality dynamic contrast systems to flicker and flash.

Next we cut to Harry chatting to the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw. This very, very grainy sequence really works out a TV's noise handling and noise reduction systems. It also features tricky low-lit skin tones on the young wizard, which can look pasty or waxy on TVs with poor contrast or inadequate colour processing. Plus its swirling cameras and bold light and dark contrasts challenge local dimming systems, highlighting any issues they may have with light 'blocking' around bright image elements.

Add in the extremely fine detail in Harry's cardigan and the background walls that poorer flatscreens either render with a nasty glowing effect or not at all, and in just three minutes – the sequence finishes at 48:55 – you've got a solid handle on how good a TV/projector is. Or, at least, whether it's set up properly. **JA**



Chapter 12 in the final *Harry Potter...* movie – where poor-quality TVs go to die...

Blood spatters the lens in *Children of Men* Men's climactic shootout



CHILDREN OF MEN

Picking a path through destruction

The recent sci-fi smash *Gravity* is fantastic, but for me the dystopian *Children of Men* is still director Alfonso Cuarón's masterpiece. Its sparse, chilling sound design serves as a precursor to his space-bound Oscar grabber, and the final-act scene in which Theo (Clive Owen) and Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey) make their way through the Bexhill Refugee Camp in the midst of a bloody uprising is nothing short of astonishing. This seven-odd minute sequence (seemingly one continuous take) is all about detail, steering, dynamism and a 360-degree soundfield.

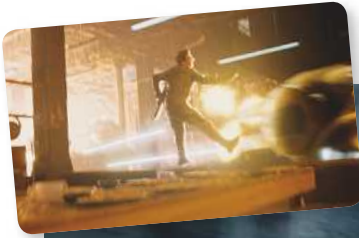
Skip to Chapter 17 and right off the bat the entire soundstage is peppered with gunshots, testing out the transient response of your speakers (1:24:01). Decent drivers will make them pop and snap with a crisp leading edge.

After Luke (Chiwetel Ejiofor) takes Kee, Theo ducks for cover from some frighteningly real gunshots inside an old bus, where bullets shatter the windows and give your tweeters something to get their teeth into (1:26:50).

At that point a tank trundles into view (1:27:16) and blasts the entrance to the adjacent tower block, while a group of surrendering refugees are mercilessly mown down (1:27:37). This is chaotic and brutal – your system should be attacking the bangs and crashes vigorously and pinging them rapidly between channels.

But the real test for your subwoofer comes when an explosion rips out the front of the tower block (1:27:47) – there's a massive billow of deep bass, accompanied by a crisp crunch as a cloud of debris rains down from above. A well-balanced system will blend these disparate parts together perfectly.

As Theo and Kee make their way out of the tower block during the cease fire (1:31:50 onwards), your speakers can show off their subtlety with the soothing choral voices – but the calmness is soon shattered by yet more explosions. **DP**



Oblivion's zippy drones provide plenty of channel-panning sonics

OBLIVION

Wraparound sci-fi sound

Even though 7.1-capable hardware is now commonplace in home cinema, native seven-channel movie mixes remain disappointingly scarce. One glorious exception is *Oblivion*. The Tom Cruise SF yarn boasts magnificent multichannel sound design and is a great audio system-stretcher; with copious fly-bys and firefights it's a doozy for detailing dynamics, sound steerage and timbre matching.

When the alien drone discovers Morgan Freeman's bunker (Chapter 9), an alarm peels right to left across the front soundstage before the invader flies front to rear left, then almost instantly returns from rear right to centre. This sonic movement should be smooth and consistent, if your speakers

are phase matched, and with no gaps in delivery. Then, when the drone is engaged, it crashes into the wall of the bunker and sends out a deep LFE ripple – if the resulting bass pressure doesn't load your room, letting you feel the explosion on your chest, then you need to take a look at your sub.

The drone trio attack in Chapter 16 is a glorious aural cacophony that should place you central to the bedlam. Want to test the effectiveness of those two extra rears? When Cruise is knocked off his feet the drone should fly in directly from the centre backs. This Chapter will also thoroughly exercise your subwoofer. Olga Kurylenko is cornered (1:39:27) by a drone, which honks deeply overhead. When it's shot down, there should be a profound low-register thud. Similarly, when the fireball erupts (1:40:21), bass FX should go disturbingly low and linger. **SM**



TANGLED

Taking a ride with Flynn Ryder

While there's no shortage of 3D movies with sequences able to nobble stereoscopic displays, few do it quite as ruthlessly and efficiently as the Disney animation *Tangled*. Indeed, you don't even need to get into the film in order to determine just how adept a screen is in the third dimension – the animated menu itself is enough to bring many a 3D display to its knees. The sequence in question has Rapunzel and Flynn Ryder floating in a boat, watching a castle from afar. Once the Scene Selection menu appears, scores of illuminated lanterns rise into the air and fill the screen. This transpires to be quite the 3D torture test, allowing an assessment to be made quickly and consistently. It's

Tangled offers impressively immersive 3D showcases and the infamous crosstalk-inducing lantern sequence

also an easy trial to stage at home. Load up the platter and look to those lanterns filling the top of the screen – are they shadowed by phantom lanterns created by crosstalk, or do they fly solo?

Chapter 3 (*Meet Flynn Rider*) is another splendid barometer. This chase sequence has enormous depth, with characters and forest elements depicted on multiple planes (16:20). Is the illusion of depth consistent or does it wander? Is the rocky outcrop to the left clean or shadowed?

Similarly, when Maximus the Horse and Ryder plummet to the Earth (18:24), the fore-, middle- and background ought to be distinctly rendered. Watch out for foliage smooching into the middleground. **SM**

AND OVER TO YOU...

HCC's Facebook fans reveal their disc picks



Terence Stamp:

'To show off the picture on my projector: *Elysium* on Blu-ray. To show off sound with a movie: *Iron Man 3* or *Thor: The Dark World*. To really show off hi-fi: Anything on vinyl – Lily Allen, Metallica or Black Sabbath...'

Steve Old:

'*Prometheus* for the best picture quality and *The Green Mile* for bass as the electric chair starts.'

Daz Payne

'*Jurassic Park*. Excellent surround sound and the bass on the T-Rex stomping around that car attack scene is amazing.'

John Rashbrook

'I use *Open Range* for the gunshots as they scare the crap out of me!'

Tero Alatalo

'*Total Recall* for picture (Mastered in 4K) and *Lord of the Rings* trilogy for audio. DTS Neo:X sounds good with thousands of horses!'

Terry Peake

'The beach scene in *Saving Private Ryan* for surround sound.'

Andy Audsley

'Jackson's *King Kong*. The V-Rex fighting Kong scene has amazing sound. It shakes the house!'

Adrian Naunton

'*Avatar* for pin-point sound placement and great colour graduation throughout. Any part of the *Dredd* movie rocks, too!'

Gaven Eogan

'Any of the new animated Disney Blu-rays, like *Frozen*, for picture sharpness. No real-world lens problems involved... perfect one-to-one pixel mapping.'

THE EXPENDABLES 2

Taking action to new heights

The world's first BD to have its audio 'optimised' for DTS Neo:X 11.1, *The Expendables 2* is about as big, bad and loud as action movies get, and the discrete 7.1 DTS HD-MA audio contains phase-mixed height and width channel information to create a sublime 11.1 audio experience of the most visceral kind.

You need go no further into the disc than the opening sequence to appreciate the scale of the visual and sonic madness either. Throughout the first few minutes the thumping score to the scene in Nepal is pushed through all channels, including the heights, increasing the drama and atmosphere with a wall of sound at the front of your room.

The height channels really come into their own when the team take down a helicopter (05:22). The explosive impact of motorbike hitting chopper is heavily routed to those elevated speakers, pushing the sound high in the room to emulate the sky-bound action. Later, as bullets fly when our intrepid heroes break camp (07:58) ricochet sounds whizz overhead. The heights play a starring role, lifting the effect in the room and giving the scene real three-dimensional presence.

The sound of the whole movie is immersive, although very short on dynamic range – it's all loud. Still, as a demo of Neo:X and the benefits of height speakers, it's fun from start to end. **RS**

The Expendables 2 features a soundmix tailored for DTS Neo:X



LIMITLESS

Someone's at the door!

Some subwoofers are totally bonkers. Ones that make you believe the house is falling down. But power without control is nothing and a good woofer must stop dead as suddenly as it starts explosively. A fabulous demo sequence to reveal this can be found at the beginning of the Bradley Cooper sci-fi flick *Limitless*. No time stamp necessary – just whack in the disc and press play. Our hero is atop the parapet of a fortress-like apartment, while a Russian gangster smashes his way through the door. He might be about to jump...

This starting sequence, from the very first frames, is crescendoic and explosive. Bam. Bam. BAM! The LFE is metallic and deep and hard, it repeats louder and louder and has as large a rise time as I have ever heard or felt. There are other superb subwoofer tests around, from the prairie thunder roll in *No Country For Old Men* to Tom Cruise tumbling into the underground cavern in *Oblivion*, but this is one I return to again and again. **AR**

Bradley Cooper runs away from his subwoofer...



LEGENDS OF JAZZ SHOWCASE

It's Miller time!

Undoubtedly one of the best-produced multichannel Blu-ray discs for music, *Legends of Jazz Showcase* could turn a Death Metal fan onto sax and bass tunes. Coming off the disc in uncompressed Dolby TrueHD as a native 5.1-channel mix, the recording's clarity and heavy use of centre and surround channels makes for a thoroughly engaging sound with spatial



imaging that no two-channel music replay system will ever manage.

Bass guitar supremo Marcus Miller opens the track *The Panther* with some subtle plucking and noodling of his fret board (09:40). It's a warm sound, rich with detail and realism. There's tangible presence and anticipation from the audience revealed in the finest

detail through the rear channels. The gentle slides and dynamic string plucks give you big clues to the sound to come.

You hold your breath in anticipation, give the volume knob another tweak upwards, and

Miller lets rip with a slap bass riff (10:01) that delivers pure funk with realism and power. Each slap is lightning-strike quick and delivered with hammer-weight punch. A few seconds later (10:06) the crisp sound of the drums kick in with breath-taking dynamic attack. The leading edge of the snare is taut and vicious, backed up by an enormous bass drum beat. It is a thorough system workout, from the lowest frequencies to the highest, in the space of 10 seconds and leads cleanly into a track so rich and mellifluous that you could be right there in the audience with a Martini and fat cigar. Stereo music fans skeptical of 5.1 need to hear this... **RS**

Listen to 21st century sound

Stereo sound was invented over 80 years ago. Isn't it time for an upgrade asks British audio brand **Orbitsound**? Could the company's latest model, the M10 powered by airSOUND Technology™, be just that?



ALL MAJOR INVENTIONS from the early part of the 20th century – film, photography, air travel, cars – have over the last 100 years evolved beyond recognition. Photography, for example, started out on plates, then moved on to film before becoming fully digitalised just as the last century was drawing to a close.

Yet, stereo technology – the idea that natural sound is best reproduced by splitting it into left/right input and output – was invented over 80 years ago, and has since never really been challenged. Why? Because it's an easily understood concept. We have a left ear and a right ear so, as the theory goes, we need a left-hand speaker and a right-hand speaker. And indeed, this idea works brilliantly as long as you're sitting perfectly in the 'sweet spot', the place right in the middle of both speakers. If not, there is interference, duplication or cancellation of audio signals or echoes, which will lead to drastically inferior sound quality. In a way stereo technology dictates where you should sit.

After more than 80 years of stereo as the industry standard, **British audio technology brand Orbitsound went back to the drawing board** and, based upon over 40 years of professional sound recording experience, developed airSOUND Technology. 'This truly is the next generation of audio technology,' comments Orbitsound's founder Ted Fletcher. 'We can't believe no one has come up with this before.'

Instead of merely splitting an audio track into two identical signals, airSOUND

Technology converts the sound into a main signal (the bit that's identical even in stereo) and a spatial signal (the bit that tells listeners where the sound comes from). The result is that there is absolutely no need to be in the 'sweet spot' as signal interference or cancellation is completely eliminated.

Award-winners

Ever since that technology breakthrough, Orbitsound has brought out a range of award-winning soundbars – including the latest model, the Orbitsound M10, which also takes advantage of the fact that airSOUND Technology requires far less space to produce natural, immersive and room-filling sound than most other systems currently available. The M10 is made up of an elegant and discreet unit and a compact small subwoofer, and comes complete with a full set of cables, including optical, AUX, and 3.5mm. Made from high gloss, hand-painted wood, the elegant units are completely non-resonant, delivering a pure and clean sound whether running at high or low volume. At just over a foot long, the unit is incredibly simple to install with no multiple speakers. Add in the fact that it also enhances TV and home cinema audio, and the M10 becomes a perfect all-rounder, especially when it comes to listening to music or watching concerts or music videos.

Stereo is good – airSOUND Technology is better ■

SPECIFICATIONS

Orbitsound M10

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 2.5in mid-high drivers; 1 x 1in tweeter, 2 x 2in full-range spatial generators

ENCLOSURE: Sealed/Orbitsound spatial

POWER HANDLING: 200W

CONNECTIONS: Bluetooth; optical digital audio; 3.5mm; phono audio

DIMENSIONS: 90(h) x 500(w) x 100(d)mm

WEIGHT: 2.2kg

Orbitsound M10 subwoofer

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 6.5in bass driver

TYPE: Active, slim-line, tuned reflex

DIMENSIONS: 140(w) x 230(h) x 345(d)mm

WEIGHT: 3.6kg

DETAILS

Orbitsound M10

→ £299.95

Available from Richer Sounds

→ www.orbitsound.com

→ Tel: 0207 294 7331



Your Smart TV is dumb...

Well, that's what LG reckons. **Steve May** reports from the company's Silicon Valley laboratory where it's designed a connected platform it hopes will kickstart a new era of Smart



LG's revamped interface is based on detailed research into how consumers interact with their TV

IT'S A CURIOUS fact that even the smartest TVs can seem inscrutably dumb. So much so that many buyers fail to even get them online. Even if you're tech savvy, Smart TVs often seem little more than utilitarian devices.

Until now, that is. This year LG has introduced a new type of Smart using the freshly baked webOS platform. Sold with the mantra 'Making TV simple again,' these screens are anything but simple beneath the hood. To learn more, *HCC* travelled to LG's Silicon Valley Lab in Santa Clara.

By its own admission, the Korean giant has found it difficult to recruit local software developer talent in Seoul. Even an idea to mandate English in order to attract talent floundered. But demonstrably it has now solved the problem following the acquisition of the webOS software division from Hewlett Packard. Originally a mobile platform devised by Palm, LG had been working with HP to evolve a TV-centric iteration when the opportunity arose to acquire webOS outright. The company swooped. Now, from a purpose-built facility in the heartland of America's software community, it's humanising the Smart TV experience.

'Silicon Valley is a great place to find great, diverse talent,' says Ohad Ben-Yoseph, Director of Business Development. 'We have people working here from all parts of the world who bring their expertise and their backgrounds into the software and product development process – US and Canada, Korea, Singapore, Ireland, France, Germany, Netherlands...

'It quickly becomes apparent that LG's new models aren't just flat TVs with internet connectivity bolted on'

we have a very diverse team. LG sells TVs worldwide. We want to have a global input into what is the right product.'

Certainly LG has never produced anything quite like webOS before; there's something distinctly Apple about its simplicity and elegance. 'I think we have a very Silicon Valley way of approaching development that has been perfected over the years. Such as failing fast, fast prototyping,' notes Ben-Yoseph. 'We have a lot of engineers here; our UX [User Experience] team is bigger than you'll find in most companies.'

Perhaps this explains the inherent humour in webOS, which uses cartoony cut scenes and language typically absent from run-of-the-mill consumer electronics. LG's Colin Zhao, director of product development, agrees: 'Yes, we take an irreverent approach to creating products...' As *HCC* tours the building, we notice that all the meeting rooms are named after classic video games – *Pitfall*, *Galaga*, *Zelda* and *Breakout* amongst others.

In use, it quickly becomes apparent that an LG's webOS model isn't another flat TV with internet connectivity grafted onto it. The operating system



seems woven into the fabric of the panel, from the uniform use of fonts to the tightly-knit app launcher.

So where did LG take its inspiration from? 'Back in the day TV was simple and enjoyable, you just turned it on and relaxed. We wanted to recreate that experience for modern users,' answers Zhao.

'What we've seen in the past is manufacturers taking a smartphone user interface and blowing it up to fit a TV. The problem is a phone is a productivity device, the user isn't really engaged with it. We felt people should be inspired by their TV, find it playful and engaging.'

To fine-tune webOS, the Silicon Valley team conducts endless consumer research sessions, filming viewers interacting with various prototypes. They discovered several ways to significantly improve the user experience. 'The first was switching between physical and online sources,' reveals Zhao. 'The TV is a big switcher. The most popular button used on the remote is the input button, so we made that much better. Content discovery is also key. Because there is so much to discover, the challenge was to make it enjoyable. Finally, there was the challenge of connections and setup. How could we take something that looks as cold and clunky as Windows 95, and turn it into something we have an emotional bond with?'

LG UK's senior content and services manager Darren Petersen



Bean Bird is LG's webOS mascot, and guides you through initial setup

LG BROADENS APP APPEAL OF WEBOS WITH CONNECT SDK

LG believes it can get app makers to prioritise webOS with a new open-source Connect SDK kit that brings cross-platform compatibility to webOS, Amazon Fire TV, Roku and Chromecast.



'For us, the notion of second screening is very important, so we developed Connect SDK to persuade developers to connect their apps to the TV,' explains Henry LeVak, senior product manager responsible. 'Currently Fire TV has one sort of API, Roku something else and Chromecast

something different again. When you fragment like that developers often pick just one platform. Connect SDK software goes within all these different platforms.'

An initial partner is app-maker MusiXmatch. Its app plays music on a smartphone and adds lyrics, pictures and metadata. 'By dropping our Connect SDK into it, it launches a cloud-based app that takes the song being played on your smartphone and presents it on the webOS TV.'

Now TV, which joined LG's content platform last year, is retained for 2014



LG's California-based webOS team take a break from plotting Smart domination

The solution was a simplified Home screen that offers every type of source, from tuner, IPTV and local sources, as well as a history of recent activity, all accessed via a horizontal bar of coloured slides. For the first time, viewers can effectively treat Netflix or YouTube as just another channel, hopping between them without having to exit and then relaunch apps.

'We've invested a lot of time and money into perfecting the switch,' confides Jim Sirraco, webOS product teamster. 'Everyone has sources, everyone has content. Switching should be the easiest, fastest thing you can do. On webOS we can switch back and forth between live TV and a 4K Netflix stream instantly. Similarly, if you want to switch from Netflix to YouTube and then back again, it'll pick up exactly where you left off.'

Typically around four apps stay active in memory, but this can vary depending on how memory-intensive the resource is. 'The more recently you've

used the app, the greater priority is given to keeping that alive, as it's likely to be the one you want to switch back and forth between. But even if the app isn't running anymore, it will still show you what you were last watching on it.'

Darren Petersen, senior content and services manager for LG UK, confirms that elements of the UI and launcher have been specifically tailored for UK users. 'We've customised the LG Store, which offers content recommendations as well as apps, to put an emphasis on catch-up as well as VOD movies. Users can also customise the launcher to put their most-used services first, be it Blinkbox or YouTube.'

The brand has also made it significantly simpler for developers to create new webOS apps. 'As webOS is built on common web standards, it's really attractive to developers,' says Petersen. Importantly, the platform isn't intrinsically processor-dependant. 'webOS is going to be on 70 per cent of our UK TV lineup this year, from mass-market to high-end models. Of course, in those different devices there are different chipsets, but you'll not see a massive difference between them in terms of performance.'

In the short term, webOS will only appear on TVs. 'This year, media devices like Blu-ray players, soundbases and so on will be running the 2013 LG Smart platform. I simply can't comment on what's coming next...' says Petersen.

The personality of webOS is embodied by a mascot called Bean Bird, who greets people when they first power up their TV. 'He was the idea of our artistic director,' confides product manager Danielle Zimmerman. 'First time setup is something people really struggle with. The worst thing when you bring home a TV is when you take it out of the box and are faced with a lot of static menus. Users don't know what they have to do and what they can skip over. Bean Bird is a way to simplify the process.'

While the genus of LG's dumpy mascot may be unknown, he does have a secret. 'Bean Bird wasn't always called Bean Bird. He was originally called Fat Bird,' reveals Zimmerman. 'But that name didn't pass the PR test...' ■

LG AND HARMAN/KARDON DELIVER SOUND COLLABORATION

The Korean manufacturer has roped in the US audio specialist to improve flatscreen sonics

'Nearly every epic entertainment experience combines a powerful auditory element with spectacular visuals.' So says In-kyu Lee, LG senior vice president and TV Division honcho, as the reasoning behind a tie-up with his company and Harman/Kardon that sees a new audio technology gracing its top-flight screens.

Dubbed Ultra Surround, it resides on the company's duo of OLED models and three tiers of 4K sets. LG says that in collaboration with its screens' premium pictures it will help deliver 'a level of

viewer immersion previously only found in cinemas.' While that sounds suspiciously like marketing spiel, it certainly has AV appeal. The flagship UB980V models (available in 84in, 79in and 65in versions) all sport a 4.2-channel speaker configuration, with the dual woofers aiming to counter the bass-lite performance of a typical flatscreen. Proprietary algorithms work to create an immersive soundscape from this front soundstage array, with LG claiming audio is output in multiple directions to balance foreground and

background noise and retain dialogue clarity.

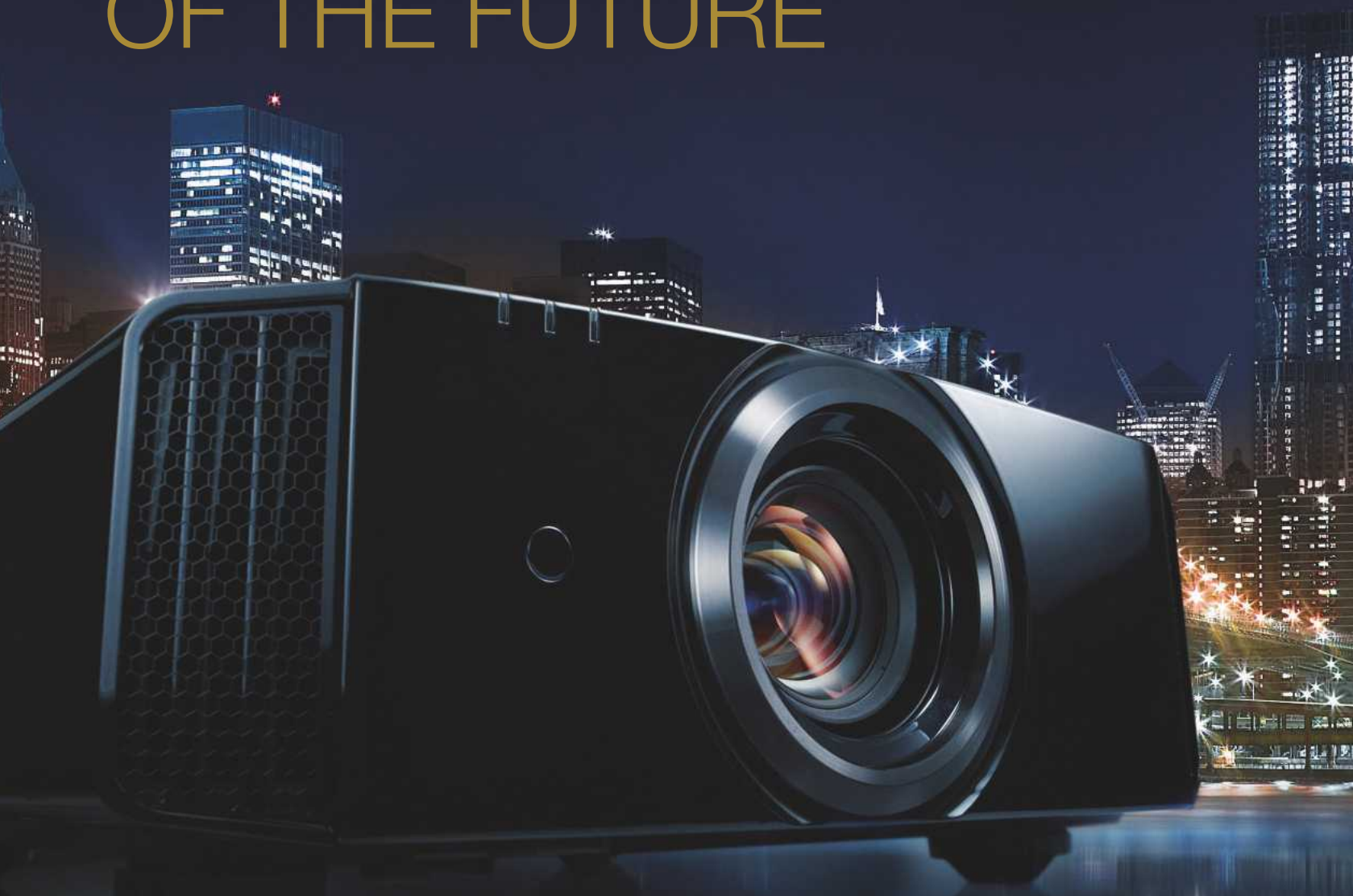
'In a scene featuring heavy rain, for example, viewers will feel as though drops are falling all around them, yet still be able to hear on-screen dialogue clearly,' says the company.

This collaboration between LG and Harman/Kardon is part of a wider working relationship between the two firms, which has also seen the launch of high-end Bluetooth stereo headphones for use with LG's smartphones.



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* The 2014 range of JVC D-ILA Projectors consists of model numbers DLA-X900R, DLA-X700R, DLA-X500R. Visit www.jvc.co.uk for more details.

** Contrast ratio specifications are for the DLA-X900R.



Putting AV in a van

For the New York Auto Show, Ford called upon the CI world to give a Transit van an overhaul. **Adrian Justins** plans a roadtrip

AV BRANDS IN cars is nothing new. If you drive an Audi, for example, the chances are you are listening to a Bang and Olufsen system. For Maserati think Bowers and Wilkins and for Bentley it's Naim, where you can have as many as 20 speakers, powered by 2,200W. If you want more speakers, get a Range Rover with Meridian's 29-driver array.

And these days it's not unheard of to find iPhone inputs, SD card slots, Bluetooth connectivity and multi-disc CD changers in the front of a high-end car. Rear-seat passengers can get an even better deal, with the addition of individual LCD displays on the back of the front seats for movie-watching. For the home cinema enthusiast, though, the idea of

watching a movie on a seven- or eight-inch display in the luxury of a Bentley is like being served a bucket of KFC at Claridges. Cars just don't have the space for a full-on home cinema-style viewing experience. Ah, but vans do... Step forward the Ford Motor Company.

One for the road

While a white Skyliner Transit van might not seem an obvious choice for a picture palace on wheels, Ford decided to bring the concept to life with a custom design debuted at the New York Auto Show. And the finished result shows

VAN CHECKLIST

STEWART FILMSCREEN:

53in drop-down
FireHawk screen

WOLF CINEMA:

SDC-6
projector; ProScaler MK III
processor

KALEIDESCAPE: DV700 disc
vault and Premiere Line system

APPLE: 3 x iPad

MARANTZ: AV7701 processor

CRESTRON: Digital QMT
shade motor; RMC3 controller;
TSW-550 wall-mounted
touchscreens; lighting

FOCAL: 7 x Grand Utopia
speakers

TOTEM ACOUSTIC: Tribe
subwoofer & amplifier

SUNFIRE: TGA-7201 seven-
channel power amp



The driver can control the van's automated systems via a built-in Crestron touchscreen



The back of the van finds space for a mini-bar...



...although it's hidden when the 53in projector screen is in use

how far you can go with a moving movie theatre when you put your mind – and a few bucks – to it.

The suitably-named 'Mad' Mike Martin of California-based Galpin Auto Sports was recruited to design the mechanical systems, lighting layout and HVAC solutions, while The Source AV Design Group, a pro-install outfit also from California, designed and integrated the audio-visual and control systems.

Operation of this high-spec white van is state-of-the-art – it features integrated Crestron control for adjusting lighting, shades, >

The luxury interior includes wooden floors, LED lighting and bespoke seats



iPads are used as additional controllers

The van even comes with custom-designed luggage...



HVAC, AV systems, security and power seating. This is done via 5in, in-wall touchscreens near the driver's seat and in the rear bulkhead. Alternatively, there are three iPads handily docked throughout the vehicle for controlling the lighting, shades, projector screen and the Kaleidescape movie system. The latter provides 1080p-quality downloads from the Kaleidescape Store or Blu-ray disc playback, using a combination of disc vault and player.

Images are created by a Wolf Cinema SDC-6 3D 1080p DLP projector, and displayed on a drop-down FireHawk screen from Stewart Filmscreen. The size is only 53in, but considering the viewing distance and other space limitations, bigger might not have been better.

The sonic side is equally high-end, too. Passengers/viewers can enjoy 7.1 surround sound from custom in-wall speakers derived from Focal's Grand Utopia technology, and a Tribe subwoofer from US brand Totem Acoustic. Audio processing is handled by a Marantz AV7701, fed into a separate Sunfire power amp. This domesticated pre-amp offers some features that seem unnecessary for a theatre in a truck – particularly the dedicated multiroom HDMI output – but its bank of inputs certainly provide system flexibility.

When not being used for movies, the sound system can play CDs that have been imported to the Kaleidescape server, or make use of the Marantz's net radio/AirPlay talents.

A portion of the van's interior has been sectioned off for housing much of the system electronics.

The Crestron RMC3, Kaleidescape pair and Marantz processor are all snugly racked in the 18in-deep compartment, and even the Wolf Cinema PJ lives here, too, ceiling-mounted and firing through a discreet opening in the wall of the 'cinema room'.

'We've packed a lot of technology into a compact

space,' boasts Jason Lord of The Source AV.

Shhhh!

Away from its audio-visual flair, this over-engineered Ford has a neat trick up its sleeve – it's one of the first installations of Crestron's new Digital QMT shade motor. Okay, this isn't the sort of gadget likely to inspire the masses, but this brushless DC motor provides virtually silent control of the window blinds from a compact, energy-efficient design. For those in the back of the van, this means light and prying eyes can be blocked with a touch of a button and barely a sound.

In-car entertainment has certainly come a long way since the days when a Ford Granada with an eight-track stereo cassette player was considered the pinnacle... ■

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REVIEWS

→ **HARDWARE HIGHLIGHTS** SONY KD-65X9005B 4K TV with Magnetic Fluid speaker array **SAMSUNG** 40in H6400 LED Smart TV & 1TB Freeview PVR/BD player **MOREL** Designer sub/sat 5.1 system **FOCAL** Dimension soundbar **JBL** Authentics L16 wireless speaker **MEDE8ER** Flexible HD media player **ROUNDUP** A quartet of affordable Blu-ray players go head-to-head **AND MORE!**

Back in the game



Pioneer returns to the £500 AVR market with the VSX-924, bringing Bluetooth and Wi-Fi streaming to the party. See p42 for more

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

38 SONY KD-65X9005B → Approx £3,600

The speaker 'wings' make this the biggest 65in TV around



HE'S BACK!
I, Frankenstein revamps Shelley's classic. Blu-ray review, p97

The 65in X9005B 4K TV sees Sony aiming for the top. **Steve May** believes it's succeeded

Wideboy Bravia

WHATEVER ANGLE YOU take, Sony's KD-65X9005B is a formidable 4K proposition. With its mould-breaking design, pixel-pushing picture processing and audiophile pretensions, it sees Sony's TV division at its most confident in years.

Also available in 55in and 79in guises, this is a screen to saviour. The triangular 'Wedge' form factor may take some initial getting used to (particularly if you have a hankering for a truly slim screen) but I quickly grew to love it. Overall build quality is superb, with the chromed end panels and rolled top evoking a premium feel. You'll need some room to park it, though. The forward-facing speaker array extends the width of the set to 149cm. Measure up before you buy!

A low centre of balance means that the TV's two chromed feet and bag of screws are all that's needed to keep it upright. If their edge-placement is too wide for your AV furniture, you can bolt the boots more centrally in an optional second position. To be honest, though, this doesn't look quite so well balanced.

Alternatively you can wall-mount the panel. Provided in the box are custom spacers which compensate for the angled shape when using a standard VESA mount. Also bundled is a port replicator. This PTR-BR100 box has its own power supply and single satellite and RF connections, plus inputs for a solitary USB and three HDMI inputs. A tethered chord breaks out into the required back-panel inputs. While this may help simplify cable management when wall-mounting, it's worth noting that the port replicator doesn't support MHL.

If you prefer to lace your kit conventionally you can take advantage of four HDMI inputs, one with ARC and two MHL-compliant, plus three USBs, Ethernet, Scart, component/

As well as this remote, the X9 is bundled with a touchpad controller



AV INFO

PRODUCT: 4K Smart TV with Active 3D, 'Wedge' design and Magnetic Fluid speakers

POSITION: Positioned above Sony's X85 4K range

PEERS: Panasonic TX65AX802; Samsung UE65HU8500



The feet can be moved to a more central position if your AV furniture isn't wide enough

composite video and stereo audio inputs. There's also a TV aerial jack, twin satellite LNB input for dual tuners, CI card slot and a digital audio optical output.

The screen comes with both a standard remote and a touchpad Bluetooth controller. The latter is ostensibly more intuitive to use, however it's extremely sensitive and requires a good deal of patience.

No more being Passive

Of course, there's more than just a design change to differentiate this year's X9 from the 2013 model. A new panel supplier means a return to Active Shutter 3D, compared to the Passive flavour of last year. Two pairs of shuttering 3D glasses are supplied.

Personally I prefer Passive 3D, particularly on a 4K screen able to upscale away any detail deficit. However, it has to be said the 3D here works extremely well, provided you view in a light-controlled room where flicker isn't going to be an issue. Crosstalk is negligible, and oddly the set appears to produce better results from side-by-side 3D broadcasts (eg. Sky) than it does from sequential 3D Blu-ray. Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim* (via Sky 3D) proved a real knockout. The dimensional images offered astounding stereo separation while the convoluted image processing delivered a picture that looked much like *faux* 4K.

Picture quality is outstanding with both Full HD and 4K. The KD-65X9005B delivers deep blacks with Himalayan peaks, courtesy of Sony's new X-tended Dynamic Range image processing; there are no greyed-out night scenes or compromised shadow details to worry about. The screen also has a quite extraordinary colour palette, particularly when

'60Hz football footage shows just how transformational 4K will be when it comes to sports coverage'

it comes to saturated reds and greens, which are deep and rich. *Pacific Rim*'s invading Kaiju appear positively fluorescent.

A single dedicated chip, the XCA8-4K, handles the Sony's 2160p upscaling, after the signal has been colour managed. And it's a superior slice of silicon – when Gipsy Danger drags a boat from the harbour and uses it as a weapon against the Otachi Kaiju in *Pacific Rim*'s most spectacular battle scene, the level of detail and texture in the image is clinically mind-blowing. Any 4K doubters will be left speechless.

Triluminos image processing is compatible with the extended x.v.color information included in Sony's Mastered in 4K Blu-ray line, although this only works on the Cinema preset. Non-linear expansion allows the set to deliver a near full DCI spectrum without compromising skin tones, says the brand.

Unlike last year's debut X9 4K model, there's an HEVC decoder onboard here, making the set compliant with Netflix 4K. *House of Cards: Season 2* proves to be a feast of fine detail, while the service's assorted *Moving Art* travelogues are similarly impressive. Of course, the downside of long exposure to such hi-res material is that SD channels become all but unwatchable.

Motion handling is somewhat different from, and not quite as good as, last year's X9 series, although you'll be hard pressed to tell during normal viewing. Results are entirely dependent on Motionflow setting. The most appealing options are Standard, Clear and True Cinema, all of which avoid overt motion artefacting; they do, however, deliver variable levels of motion resolution. The Cinema setting inevitably has the most filmic presentation but is relatively low on detail. Crisper images are delivered by Standard. Smooth offers up pronounced artefacting and should be avoided altogether, while Impulse is far too flickery to be watchable.

Bass fiends can partner the TV with Sony's optional wireless woofer



The 'Wedge' design means bigger drivers for 2014

Going native

To really see the set in all its glory, I hooked up a 4K media player (the Sony POP-FMPA60) preloaded with 3,840 x 2,160 resolution sequences, some of which were in high frame-rate 60Hz. Live concert footage of Muse was packed with intricacies, emphasising crowd reactions and revealing raw emotion on Matthew Bellamy's face as he hollers 'Follow me!' Meanwhile, an almost impossibly dynamic sequence featuring a red-dressed jazz crooner locked in inky darkness is compelling proof of the set's black-level chops, while footage shot at the FIFA Confederations Cup, in 60Hz, shows just how transformational 4K will be when it comes to sports coverage. Player detail is hyper real, and probably better than being there with 20/10 vision.

The KD-65X9005B's 'Wedge' design has afforded Sony's designers considerable scope when it comes to crafting an audio system appropriate for this screen. The wider base accommodates bigger bass drivers than before, with the result that the TV is positively forceful in its audio performance. It's compatible with the brand's Bravia SWF wireless subwoofer, which adds even more LF to the shebang, but I doubt many will feel a need to add it considering it adds an extra £250 to the price tag.

And the improved audio isn't just down to space. Compared to its 2013 4K sets, Sony has upgraded everything from circuitry and the Magnetic Fluid speaker units to the driving DSP. The set claims a 65W audio power output from an upgraded amplifier, with 12.5W going to the main stereo pair and 2 x 20W going to rear ported subs. This is the same as last year, but there's a beefier power supply and the drivers are now Mica-coated glass fibre designs. The result is greater rigidity, giving finer details and gutsier transients.

As good as it gets

When it comes to sound and vision, Sony's KD-65X9005B is pretty much as good as it gets. A cocktail of vibrant hues, effortless dynamics and scintillating resolution make this a 2160p display to savour. With 4K content it's mesmerizing, and thankfully Full HD upscaling with X-Reality PRO is often astonishingly effective. Even the Active 3D performance is thoroughly entertaining.

Add to that a rich variety of Smart functionality, HEVC and HDMI 2.0 future-proofing and best-in-class audio, and you've arguably the most compelling reason yet to jump onboard the 4K UHD bandwagon.

Yes, it's not curved nor super-skinny. It's a grown-up display for grown-up AV hedz. Just how I like it ■

ON THE MENU



→ Sony's UI is perhaps not the most visually interesting (and its Smart portal misses out on some key VOD apps), but it provides an easy gateway to making picture adjustments. Settings can be tailored to individual inputs

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active Shutter 3D (two pairs of glasses supplied)

4K/ULTRA HD: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 resolution

TUNER: Yes. 1 x Freeview HD; 2 x satellite

CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; Scart; component/composite video; 3 x USB; Ethernet; optical digital audio output; CI slot

SOUND: 65W

BRIGHTNESS: N/A

CONTRAST RATIO: 'More than one million'

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,494(w) x 790(h) x 95(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 45.9kg

FEATURES: Motionflow XR800; media server playback from USB and network; integrated Wi-Fi; X-Reality PRO processing engine; X-tended Dynamic Range; Triluminos colour; Clearaudio +; One-Flick Discovery UI and Sony Entertainment Network; Football mode; Magnetic Fluid speakers; optional wireless subwoofer; adjustable feet

HCC VERDICT



Sony KD-65X9005B

→ £3,600 Approx → www.sony.co.uk

→ Tel: 0845 6000 124

HIGHS: Superb image definition; deep blacks and great dynamic range; excellent audio performance; dramatic design; One-flick Discovery bar UI

LOWS: Active Shutter 3D at its best only in a dark room; not a full compliment of catch-up

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Mark Craven gets to play with the star of Pioneer's affordable AVR line – and comes away pretty pleased

Revamped and ready to rock

ANYONE ENJOYING A game of 'spot the difference between two AV receivers' would face a stiff task if faced with Pioneer's new VSX-924 and its predecessor, the VSX-923. This £500 home cinema power-pusher sports the same neat styling and shares many of the same specifications. But dig a little deeper and you'll find some key upgrades that see Pioneer embracing new trends in AV.

Chief amongst these, perhaps, is the employment of HDMI 2.0 connectivity. Pioneer claims the VSX-924 will pass full 4K/60p with 4:4:4 colour sampling, allowing it to potentially form part of a next-gen setup. However, it doesn't support HDCP 2.2, the latest copy protection standard which could conceivably form part of a 4K BD standard, although Philippe Coppens, Pioneer Europe's product manager, says that any future HDCP 2.2 sources are likely to have dual outputs so the AVR can be bypassed...

Okay, so maybe it's not as future-proof as you might like, but Pioneer has endowed the VSX-924 with other state-of-the-art features. An apt-X Bluetooth receiver is now built-in, doing away with the frustrating buy-a-£50 adaptor strategy of last year. Wi-Fi is still via adaptor, but this is bundled free in the box. Pioneer doesn't like to build it directly into the chassis for 'performance reasons', I'm told.

Beneath the hood there have been tweaks, too. The AKM DAC has been replaced by an ESS Sabre Premier ES9006S, the same you'll find in some £1,500 receivers, while custom capacitors have been fettled to massage audio. The MCACC system suite now includes subwoofer EQ in addition to the usual parameters, and tuning has been completed by Pioneer's LX team, who normally don't dirty themselves at this price point.

On the software side, Spotify Connect is present from launch (I'd prefer Rdio, personally, but that's just me) and file

compatibility now extends to multichannel 24-bit/96kHz FLAC and WAV, plus DSD over a network as well as USB. The AV Navigator interactive manual is now 'built-in' too – plop the Pioneer on your home network and you can call it up on your phone/tablet/laptop.

MHL mystery

Connectivity is rather good, considering the price point. HDMI runs to seven inputs and two outputs. One of the inputs is mounted on the front, although oddly this is no longer the MHL option (it's now on the rear). Then there are two USB ports (one front-mounted), coaxial and optical digital audio inputs, and the usual analogue tomfoolery.

Speaker binding posts feel fairly robust. In fact, so does the receiver itself – it's not going to challenge the likes of Primare's SPA23 in the luxury construction stakes, but buyers won't feel short-changed. The styling, as previously noted, is near identical to its 2013 forebear. If you like things chunky, black and symmetrical, you've come to the right place.

In use it's not the smoothest device. The combination of lengthy feature list, utilitarian menus and button-tastic remote can lead to moments of frustration. The slim, lightweight handset has been reconfigured, but still offers tiny keys, many with dual functions and confusing nomenclature. I quickly moved to the dedicated app. Pioneer is now up to iControlAV5, backwards-compatible to 2012 >

The handset has been revamped but is still rather cluttered



AV INFO

PRODUCT:

7.2-channel
networked
AV receiver

POSITION:

Occupying the key
£500 price point

PEERS:

Yamaha RX-V577;
Sony STR-DN1050;
Onkyo TX-NR636



The VSX-924 offers a neat design and chunky build



hardware, and it's absolutely stunning, even on a smartphone rather than a tablet. A feast of natty graphics and interactive controls, it strives to explain what many of the VSX-924's features do. From here, experimenting with tools like the Auto Sound Retriever or Phase Control becomes easy.

Outer-space operatics

I was a big fan of the audio performance of the VSX-923 and this successor continues the good work. Once again, multichannel film soundtracks benefit from a sound that is clear, focused and adept at eking out detail.

With *Gravity* on Blu-ray, the Pioneer approaches its DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix with cool, calculated poise. Audio pans are guided with stellar precision, so that when Sandra

'The VSX-924 is another well-judged AVR from a brand that certainly knows its audio onions'

Bullock's unfortunate astronaut is sent spinning into space in the opening act, the mixture of Foley effects, panicked screams, and electro score slip and slide around the soundfield. Combined with my Monitor Audio MASS 5.1 array, the result is delightfully cinematic. All of this occurs with the amp's MCACC Room EQ system in use. Getting it set up involves the usual beepy-noise banter, and once complete it certainly made good strides in my room, improving the overall balance and cohesion of the front soundstage in particular. You can manually tweak its settings, or switch it off, if you prefer.

With the shootout at the close of Prohibition Era drama *Lawless* (BD), the VSX-924 brings dynamic attack to the gunshots and ricochets. Foley effects are crisply delivered, again with pin-point accuracy, and low-frequency impacts impress. The AVR remains in utter control.

The back panel majors on digital connectivity, with only a few legacy analogue hookups

Don't mistake the VSX-924's deft handling for a conservative nature, though: it offers impressive punch for its price from its claimed 7 x 150W (into six ohm) power plant and relishes up-tempo music material. Clubland hit *#Selfie* by The Chainsmokers, streamed via Bluetooth (MP3), pumps out of my array with foot-tapping vigour. Indeed, the Pioneer's Bluetooth integration means it's so easy to enjoy your digital library in surround sound that you'll wonder why you bought that budget wireless speaker at Christmas.

FLAC, WAV, M4A and MP3 files all happily played out from my network and USB. As did DSD 64 material, but not higher-spec DSD 128 files. Britten's *Simple Symphony Op 4*, downloaded from www.2L.no in the former, showed the VSX-924 comfortable with the change of pace and increase in fidelity, conveying the layered nature of this string piece and good instrument separation. Of course, audiophiles will find it lacks in terms of sheer smoothness and fluidity, and there's a sense that it's digging hard into its reserves rather than coasting along unflustered, but this is, after all, a budget proposition.

Useful upgrades

Indicative of the rather slow-moving nature of the entry-level/mid-range AVR market, the VSX-924 arrives offering useful upgrades rather than a brand-new approach. Beyond, perhaps, its HDMI 2.0 spec and Wi-Fi/Bluetooth chops, it doesn't present any urgent reason to replace another £500 receiver from the last couple of years, should you have one. Those with bigger budgets and serious setups will pass it by, waiting for the next-gen sound formats of Dolby Atmos and Auro 3D to break cover.

Yet it caters admirably for the home cinema separates newbie. The VSX-924 is another well-judged AVR from a brand that certainly knows its audio onions. Packed with features, and great value for money, just add a 5.1 array and you can sample authentic cinema sound ■

ON THE MENU



→ The onboard user interface is a dimly lit cave of disappointment – all jagged white text and black backgrounds. Break out the Android/iOS app for an altogether slicker, more user-friendly and colourful experience

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And Dolby Pro-Logic IIz
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. And DTS Neo:X

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No

MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 150W (6 ohms)

MULTIROOM: Yes. Zone 2 AV

AV INPUTS: 2 x composite; 2 x digital audio (1 x optical and 1 x coaxial)

HDMI: Yes. 7 x inputs; 2 x outputs (v2.0)

VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K

COMPONENT VIDEO: Yes. 1 x input

DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 362(d) x 168(h)mm

WEIGHT: 9.8kg

ALSO FEATURING: Direct Energy Amplifier; MCACC Room EQ with subwoofer EQ; music streaming via network/USB includes WAV (96kHz/24-bit, 5.1), FLAC (96kHz/24-bit, 5.1), AIFF (96kHz/24-bit), MP3, ALAC, DSD; Spotify Connect; Apple AirPlay; Bluetooth; Wi-Fi (via free adaptor); 2 x USB; Ethernet; 2 x subwoofer preouts; 9 x speaker terminals; vTuner net radio; AM/FM radio; AV Navigator software; control via iControlAV5 app; Auto Sound Retriever; Auto Level Control; Phase Control; Virtual Speakers

HCC VERDICT

Pioneer VSX-924

→ £500 Approx → www.pioneer.eu

→ Tel: 0330 123 1240

HIGHS: Bluetooth and Wi-Fi provision; fabulous app controller; tight, controlled multichannel delivery; HDMI 2.0 connectivity

LOWS: Somewhat complex to operate; offers features you'll probably never use; weird MHL input siting; bland user interface

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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Balls of steel

Ed Selley plays keepy-uppy with yet another entrant to the sub/sat market, and is reminded that Morel is a brand with considerable pedigree

IN THE UK and the wider EU, there are so many speaker brands that we're spoilt for choice in whatever category we might be looking at. Yet this can blind us to the activities of brands from further afield – even when those brands are larger than you might expect. Morel hails from Israel and as well as a full range of home loudspeakers is also a big player in the car audio sector. The company

makes all of its drivers in-house and adheres to some distinct design practices.

In the case of the SP-2 satellite that is used all around the £1,000 MT-2 Ultra system, this means that the spherical chassis is entirely free of internal bracing and relies on the strength of the steel casework to impart the necessary strength. The driver is a dual concentric type with a 4in mid/bass driver and

a 0.75in tweeter, and makes use of a proportionally large 32mm voice coil to motivate it. The lack of bracing maximises the internal volume, which in turn allows for this relatively large driver to be fitted.

Externally, the SP-2 is well finished but not free of some design annoyances. As I've now been sent pretty much every spherical satellite going for *HCC*, the Morel compares

Each satellite speaker packs a 4in mid/bass driver and 0.75in tweeter into its spherical cabinet



favourably to the Cabasse Eole 3 in terms of overall finish but like the Cabasse has truly terrible speaker terminals – a pair of holes in the casework where the cable is ‘secured’ (and I use the word loosely) with an Allen bolt. It is fiddly and hard to access. The rubber foot is a better design idea, and gives you the option to mount the SP-2 on a horizontal or vertical surface.

The partnering PSW10 rear-ported subwoofer employs fibreglass rather than metal for its cabinet but like the satellites relies on the strength of the material and does without any internal bracing. The driver is a 10in bespoke Morel design, married to a 200W amplifier. The overall fit and finish is good but again let down by some curious design decisions, such as the lack of annotations on the crossover dial – which makes fine adjustment a matter of guesswork – and the lack of a dedicated LFE input. Niggles like this

help make the Morel package feel solid but slightly sparse.

Rushing to impress

Right from the off, connected to a Cambridge Audio 751R AV receiver, the Morels benefit from a reasonable amount of power. Their sensitivity is listed at 86dB and this seems about right. With the necessary juice, though, there is much to like – the SP2 satellites handle the final race sequence in *Rush* with an assurance unusual in speakers so small. The ever-present water effects are dealt with in a believable fashion and the vast amount of fine details in the surround mix are extracted and turned into a convincing soundstage.

What really helps the array in this instance is the dispersion. The SP-2 might be called a ‘SoundSpot’ but in reality it produces a wide and consistent presentation, and there’s a smooth handover from one to another. The speakers never truly disappear into a wall of sound – they are, after all, only 140mm in diameter – but they fare better than you might expect in terms of scale. The integration between tweeter and mid/bass driver is also very good, with dialogue well-presented and the Hans Zimmer score of *Rush* tonally believable.

Yet the more bass-infused effort from Ramin Djawadi on *Pacific Rim* – and indeed the rest of the film – does start to show up some of the weaknesses of the Morel system. The PSW10 subwoofer is a fairly impressive performer, especially given the compact dimensions. The cabinet is inert and the bass port generally unobtrusive, but the integration between it and the satellites is never as seamless as it could be. *Pacific Rim*’s scenes of skyscraper-crashing action never sound quite as coherent from top to bottom as they do on some rival sub/sat packages. With less hysterically bass-laden material the integration is rather better, and it also works well for music.

How serious an issue this will be for you will really depend on the material you listen to, but it should not detract too seriously from the Morel offering.

One of its most pleasing performance attributes is the slightly warm presentation of the speakers. This is never so pronounced that the Morels sound soft or lacking in drive, but it does mean that you can listen to them for hours with a huge variety of material without your ears begging for mercy.

This long-term listening satisfaction joins the other plus points to make the SoundSpot MT-2 Ultra an appealing package. If space is tight, these compact satellites and sensibly proportioned subwoofer should not present a serious challenge to install and they deliver a sound that is effortless and happy with a wide variety of material. I can see them finding a lot of friends ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Designer sub/sat
speaker array

POSITION:
The largest of a
range of Morel sub/
sat packages

PEERS:
Cabasse Eole 3;
Elipson Planet M 5.1;
KEF E305



SPECIFICATIONS

SOUNDSPOT SP-2

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 4in polypropylene mid/bass driver; 1 x 0.75in soft dome tweeter

ENCLOSURE: Sealed

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 120Hz-22kHz

SENSITIVITY: 86dB

POWER HANDLING: 80W

DIMENSIONS: 140mm(w) x 150(h)
x 135(d)mm

WEIGHT: 1.5kg

PSW10

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 10in doped paper woofer

ENCLOSURE: Rear-ported

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 25-160Hz

ON BOARD POWER: 200W

REMOTE CONTROL: No

DIMENSIONS: 443(w) x 370(h) x 254(d)mm

WEIGHT: 15kg

CONNECTIONS: Left/right phono

HCC VERDICT



Morel SoundSpot MT-2 Ultra

→ £1,000 Approx → www.morelhifi.com

→ Tel: 0208 420 4234

HIGHS: Well-built; spacious, detailed and smooth performance; they look quite cute

LOWS: Horrible speaker terminals; slight lack of integration with the sub; lot of competition

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

The French fancy of soundbar society

Audio marque Focal has taken a break from creating high-end floorstanders to address the soundbar and soundbase markets with its Dimension combi. [Adrian Justins](#) reports

Usually, the soundbar (top) sits in front of the soundbase-style sub



FOCAL, WITH ITS fine heritage in high-end speaker design, made the decision to join the soundbar club probably after it saw how successful Bose and B&W were doing at the premium end of the market. But neither the Bose Cinemate 1SR or B&W Panorama 2 have external subwoofer options and only the latter has the HDMI inputs that Focal's Dimension offers.

Does this make it unique? No. Harman/Kardon's Sabre SB35 totes several HDMI's and a separate sub, as does Monitor Audio's ASB-2, which (unlike the Dimension) also has AirPlay. However, the Dimension is uniquely versatile in that it can operate either as a soundbar (£890 including Bluetooth adapter) or as a soundbase, when used in conjunction with

its optional plinth-style subwoofer, in which case the price is £1,200 – this is what I've tested here. A third option is to use the Dimension 'bar with the £600 wireless Sub Air, which sports a traditional form factor.

Unusually for a soundbar, the Dimension sports five identical full-range drivers. These are newly-designed for the task but are based on a pre-existing patent for an in-car speaker with 60Hz to 20kHz frequency response. They employ ultra-flat full-range paper cone drivers with an extrusion of just 3.65mm and do not, says Focal, use treble directivity to create surround sound. Instead, phase and delay are tailored to deliver the surround left and right channels. Explains Focal MD Gérard Chrétien: 'The centre channel is usually moved back to

emphasise the surround effects but here it remains in total coherence to provide intelligible dialogue.'

Solid pairing

The Dimension is made from extruded aluminium while the Dimension Sub is fashioned from MDF, and has a glass top. Both seem solidly built.

Aesthetically, I wouldn't say the 'bar is a stunner. It's finished to a very high standard but there's something rather dominating about its immense blackness that some households may reject readily (this is code for my partner took against it).

The soundbar has bass reflex vents, while the Dimension Sub has dual elliptical woofers, working in a 'push-push' configuration to limit cabinet vibrations.

Intended to be used with screens of 50in and over, the Dimension represents Focal's biggest ever launch in terms of technology and investment. Amplification is a hefty 6 x 75W (the sixth amp powers the subwoofer) and the DSP is provided by a premium-grade 4th-gen Sharc floating point chipset.

Low frequencies (below 200Hz) are mixed in mono and reproduced by the four lateral channels into the bass vents, which Focal claims is the equivalent of an 8in woofer. Throw in the additional subwoofer and an 80Hz filter comes into play, with the soundbase reaching down to a claimed 36Hz.

The HDMI count is a tad mean in my book for a premium product, with one input and one output, although the latter is capable of

'Amplification is a hefty 6 x 75W and the DSP is provided by a premium-grade 4th-gen Sharc chipset'

accepting an ARC signal from a TV. The input is able to accept DTS-HD MA and Dolby TrueHD bitstreams, but only able to handle the core lossy 5.1 DTS or DD soundtrack (although this all happens automatically so the user doesn't have to fret). There's also a digital optical input, a 3.5mm aux input and aptX-compatible Bluetooth streaming. The lack of AirPlay is disappointing as it would allow the Dimension to be used in a multi-room context.

The Dimension subwoofer connection is made using (whisper it) spring-clip terminals. Adjacent are selector switches for calibration. If using the Dimension and Dimension Sub together all sockets and switches disappear from view as the rear of the soundbar slides up against the fascia of the subwoofer. This requires the threading of all cables under the >

AV INFO

PRODUCT: High-end soundbar/subwoofer combi with TV pedestal design

POSITION: Focal's only soundbar product

PEERS: Monitor Audio ASB-2; SpeakerCraft CS3



subwoofer to reach your AV kit. It's not inelegant, unlike the implementation of the Bluetooth receiver, which hangs off the end of a lengthy adapter cable and has a separate power cable and socket.

Calibration consists of choosing the most suitable of three settings each for distance, position and room type. On the right side of the soundbar's fascia is the touch-sensitive control panel. You're more likely to use the credit card-sized remote though, which allows you to select the input, alter the volume

'Focal's Dimension is a success. It delivers the sonic goods with finely-honed levels of clarity and great power'

(unless using ARC, in which case your TV remote assumes the role), adjust the bass level, engage Night mode and tweak lip sync.

It took me a couple of tweaks with the calibration switches to get the optimal sound for my room, with the subwoofer proving far too overbearing on its middle setting and risking shaking the curtains from their hooks during a Bluetooth listen of Lorde's *Royals*. This was easily fixed but the most significant improvement in terms of overall clarity and power came by switching from using the HDMI ARC (connected to a Samsung 46in screen) for Blu-ray playback to hooking up directly to the deck.

No power worries

With a total of 450W and a maximum SPL of nearly 105dB (subwoofer attached) there was never likely to be much concern about the Dimension's performance in terms of power. Indeed, I could never get it anywhere near its maximum volume without risking damaging my ear drums. But my greatest concern was for the ability of the drivers to deliver intelligible dialogue. I need not have worried – the Dimension skillfully handled the awesome

soundtrack from FI drama *Rush*. Pin-sharp details in the mid-range, such as revving engines, blistering tyres, camera shutters being fired and tyres skidding, were all delivered with aplomb. And amid all the cacophony the vocal interaction between the drivers and their teams on the grid came through easily and naturally.

Bass, once properly adjusted, was meaty yet tight with subtle low-end noises – rumbling thunder, the humming and throbbing of the car engines – all delivered with zest.

There's depth to the soundstage, too. When Lauda quits the Japan race and speaks to his mechanic, a car zooms past him in the background. The Dimension lived up to its name with a three-dimensional sound that transported me to the trackside and panned markedly across the soundscape.

With Sky HD fodder such as Sky News, *Pointless*, *Fargo* and live football commentary the Dimension proves itself an ideal everyday soundbar, easily used thanks to CEC operation that turns it on and off automatically. The only gripe is adjusting the lip sync, which lacks the finesse of the bar's acoustic performance.

And musically the Dimension is a decent performer with impressive imaging and more muscle than Prince's security team. Martin Garrix's electro anthem *Animals*, streamed wirelessly by Bluetooth from a MacBook Pro, was frighteningly impressive. Some may find the presentation a tad too clinical, lacking in warmth, but you can't argue with its sheer energy and clarity throughout the frequency range and no hint of distortion at club-filling volumes.

Taking the subwoofer out of the equation only shows how good the soundbar itself is in terms of bass. Unless you really dig low-end weight, or want the soundbase configuration, I reckon the soundbar alone is well up to the task.

Overall, the Dimension is a success. It might not be the most chic-looking product, but it delivers the sonic goods. In a nutshell, it has great power and its six channels have finely honed levels of clarity with a performance that's more polished than the contents of Niki Lauda's trophy cabinet ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 5 x 4in ultra-flat paper cones

AMPLIFICATION: 450W

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI (1 x ARC); digital optical input; analogue 3.5mm input; spring-clip terminals for Dimension Sub; sub line out (low-level output)

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No (but accepts 48kHz core track)

SEPARATE SUB: Yes. Passive, dual 8in x 3in elliptical woofers

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 115.5(w) x 11.5(h) x 41(d)mm (including Sub)

WEIGHT: 19.5kg (including Sub)

FEATURES: Apt-x Bluetooth audio streaming via optional adapter; HDMI CEC with auto power; adjustable bass; adjustable sound and picture synchronisation; Night mode; optimum acoustic integration through settings on the rear panel of soundbar for positioning, room acoustics and sweet spot

HCC VERDICT



Focal Dimension/Sub

→ £1,200 Approx → www.focal.com

→ Tel: +33 4 77 43 57 00

HIGHS: Well crafted, powerful sound with dynamism and clarity; good Bluetooth music playback; simple to use

LOWS: Heavy, dominating appearance; low HDMI count; no AirPlay or USB media playback

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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Danny Phillips runs the rule over a quartet of affordable disc-spinners that offer networking features and video-on-demand as well as Full HD movie thrills

LG BP645

Slim-line deck with a unique affinity for Spotify music streaming

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SONY BDP-S5200

Budget spinner again sporting a Sense of Quartz design



Adding a spot of Spotify

LG's £100 spinner provides music streaming from the market-leading platform



THE BP645 SITS one step below LG's range-topping BP740, but with a £150 premium between them and only a few features' difference, this could be a better-value alternative.

It's an understated but attractive player, tarted up in a sleek gloss-black finish with curved corners and a brushed texture on top. It's also incredibly slim – 43.5mm – which could be a blessing if shelf space is tight.

However, these snazzy looks can't disguise the fact that the deck's build quality is a touch on the flimsy side. The lightweight plastic casing lacks the opulence of an Oppo or a Cambridge Audio deck, but to be fair that's a typical trait amongst budget players.

The front-panel display is small, but the digits are bright enough to read from the sofa. Next to it is a row of hard buttons that look touch-sensitive – a canny cost-cutting measure no doubt – and a USB port for media playback from flash drives.

Rear connectivity is the standard budget-deck trio of HDMI out, optical digital audio out and Ethernet. Analogue audio ports seem to have fallen out of favour altogether on affordable players but it's no great loss.

Premium apps

The feature list is good for the money. There's built-in Wi-Fi for starters, which provides an easy way of accessing LG's Smart TV internet portal. Among the key 'Premium' apps (as LG calls them) are BBC iPlayer, Now TV, Amazon Instant Video, Netflix, Blinkbox and YouTube, but the jewel here is Spotify music streaming, which is unique amongst this quartet. Overall, though, the selection isn't as extensive as that offered by Samsung's deck in particular.

Alongside these apps is a wealth of games, puzzles and other weird stuff buried in the LG Smart World menu. You'll need to register with LG to use them. Any apps you've downloaded can be managed in the My Apps section of the main menu.



The UI uses a split navigation system and large icons

The BP645 makes an excellent DLNA streamer, pulling video, music and photos from PCs and NAS drives using the SmartShare feature – format support is comprehensive, covering everything from MKV and DivX to FLAC and MP3.

I rate its streaming performance the best of the four players. It didn't refuse to play any of my test files and instantly shunted HD and SD video material, with no stuttering or drop in resolution.

Alternatively, Wi-Fi Direct lets you stream files from compatible devices, saving you the hassle of going through a router. The same technology is used for Miracast screen mirroring, which lets you view the picture from an Android smartphone on your TV.

Conversely, the deck's catchily-titled Private Sound Mode 2.0 sends audio from the player to a smartphone or tablet over Wi-Fi, should you want to watch movies without bothering anyone else. The only major feature missing from this little lot is 4K upscaling, which – if we're being perfectly honest – most people can probably live without.

Appealing interface

LG's onscreen presentation is superb. The Home menu uses a row of large tiles across the middle of the screen, with a submenu at the bottom that changes according to what's selected. Bright, childish colours and funky graphics are the order of

the day, while the spacious layout and logical sequencing make navigation a breeze, but it can't match the main menu of Panasonic's DMP-BDT360 for speed and intuitiveness. The remote is ergonomic and well laid out, but commands don't always register first time.

In performance terms LG's BP645 does a sterling job. It pulls pixels from a Blu-ray disc as well as any of the four players here, providing fiercely sharp, rich and nuanced pictures in two or three dimensions. Images look smooth and natural, with no obvious colour flaws or digital artefacts.

Should you wish to fiddle with the image, LG has included three picture presets – Standard, Vivid and Movie – plus a User setting that lets you adjust contrast, colour, brightness and sharpness.

Disc loading is a little slower than the other three decks, taking 37 seconds to fire up the stubborn *Terminator Salvation* disc. However, the BP645 proves quiet in operation and boot-up time is fast ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes
UPSCALING: Yes. To 1080p
MULTIREGION: No. Region B BD/R2 DVD
HDMI: Yes. 1 x v1.4 output
COMPONENT: No
MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE: No
DIGITAL AUDIO: Yes. 1 x optical output
ETHERNET: Yes
BUILT IN WI-FI: Yes
SACD/DVD-A: No/No
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD DECODING: Yes
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD BITSTREAM: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 43.5(h) x 205(d)mm
WEIGHT: 1.5kg
FEATURES: Miracast screen mirroring; Wi-Fi Direct; USB port; Standard, Vivid and Movie presets and User mode; Private Sound Mode 2.0; LG Smart TV includes Now TV, BBC iPlayer and Netflix; DLNA (via Smart Share function) and USB media playback (MKV, AVCHD, DivX HD, AVI, MP3, WMA, AAC, FLAC, JPEG)

That familiar feeling

With no new Smart refresh for this mid-level deck, is Panasonic losing ground?



LIKE ENGLAND FOOTBALLER James Milner, Panasonic's entry-level Blu-ray players are always solid and reliable without doing anything spectacular. Yes, they bring useful features and eye-popping pictures, but lately they've had to watch from the bench as Samsung and Sony dazzle the crowd.

The main problem has been Panasonic's Smart content – the lacklustre Viera Connect portal delivers only a handful of compelling apps from a clunky menu system, while rivals bombard owners with loads of catch-up TV and on-demand movie services.

So does Panasonic's DMP-BDT360 redress the balance? Not really. Frustratingly, it sticks with the same Viera Connect interface of previous generations and offers only a few apps worth talking about – namely BBC iPlayer, Netflix, BBC News, BBC Sport and YouTube, plus Facebook, Twitter and vTuner radio. Obviously there are some pearls here, but competing decks offer more.

Still, the DMP-BDT360 impresses in other ways. For starters, it's handsome, sporting a brushed, black top and a front flap that conceals the disc tray and twin USB ports. These support media playback from thumb drives and external HDDs. A small LED panel shines handy info into the room, such as running times and selected functions.

At 44mm high, it's remarkably slim too, a far cry from the tank-like Panny players of yesteryear. Of course, it would be remiss

of me not to mention the deck's plastic-fantastic construction, which is worryingly light. That said, it still feels like one of the more robust decks of the bunch.

No surprises on the back panel, with a socketry line-up that consists of HDMI output, optical digital and an Ethernet port. There won't be much demand for the latter though, as the BDT360 boasts built-in Wi-Fi.

This wireless web connection also facilitates the Miracast screen mirroring feature – the antidote to eye strain from playing games on a smartphone screen – and allows you to stream media files from DLNA devices over your home network. There's a decent range of supported formats – MKV, XviD, AVCHD, MP4, JPEG, MP3, FLAC, AAC,

'The DMP-BDT360 sticks with the same Viera Connect Smart interface as previous generations'

WMA and LPCM – but I found the Panasonic less co-operative than the other three groupiest challengers, freezing a couple of times when I tried to play music files and playing HD videos in SD. It's also painfully slow when scrolling through pages of content.

Elsewhere on the feature list, the deck is 3D capable and upscales to 4K.

Aside from streaming, using the DMP-BDT360 is a breeze. The main menu is possibly the best of all four players, arranging the five main tiles into a cross to replicate the layout of the remote's direction pad. The idea is that you don't have to press enter to select an option – just one press takes you to the next screen. It's clever, quick and intuitive, while the use of crisp graphics and friendly pastel shades makes it easy on the eye.

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes
UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
MULTIREGION: No. Region B BD/R2 DVD
HDMI: Yes. 1 x v1.4 output
COMPONENT: No
MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE: No
DIGITAL AUDIO: Yes. 1 x optical output
ETHERNET: Yes
BUILT IN WI-FI: Yes
SACD/DVD-A: No/No
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD DECODING: Yes
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD BITSTREAM: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 415(w) x 43(h) x 182(d)mm
WEIGHT: 1.2kg
FEATURES: Miracast for screen mirroring; Wi-Fi Direct; 2 x USB ports; Normal, Soft, Fine presets and User mode; internet apps via Viera Connect platform include BBC iPlayer, Netflix, YouTube and BBC News; DLNA and USB media playback (MKV, XviD, AVCHD, MP4 JPEG, MP3, FLAC, AAC, WMA, LPCM)

It's just a shame that it's not matched by the other menus – when browsing DLNA or USB content, the blocky two-tone layout is uninspiring, while the age-old Viera Connect screen splits the apps over a series of pages and is a chore to navigate.

No problems to report on performance, though – the DMP-BDT360 fired unblemished 1080p images to my TV, packing the screen with blistering detail, radiant-yet-natural colour tones and a rich contrast that makes movies look instantly cinematic.

In-playback picture tweaks include Normal, Soft, Fine and User presets, the latter letting you adjust contrast, brightness, sharpness and colour. You don't really need them though, as skin tones are beautifully judged, edges exhibit no signs of bleed and fast movement is tracked smoothly.

Boot up and disc loading are quick – 29 seconds for *Terminator Salvation* and just 15 for *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* ■



The home screen is slick and easy to operate

Taking over the top job

Samsung's £130 deck claims flagship status for 2014 – so is it good enough?



LAST YEAR'S BD-F6500 was a cracking little budget player, offering the best line-up of features on the market for the money. Such was its popularity in fact, that Samsung decided to make its successor, the BD-H6500, the top model in the 2014 range rather than updating last year's flagship BD-F7500.

Still with me? Doesn't matter. Basically this means that you can expect an even better range of features at a similarly tasty price. One of those new features is support for multiroom audio alongside Samsung's M series wireless speakers, allowing you to play CDs and beam them around the house.

Looks-wise, the BD-H6500 is as minimal as it gets. It's obscenely slim (40mm – the slimmest player here) and there's absolutely no front panel clutter to speak of, save for a big, bright LED panel and a USB port hidden behind a flap.

The über cool, black-as-night colour scheme and single curved corner make a distinctive style statement. It's arguably the best-looking player of the lot, although it's incredibly light and plasticky.

A circle of touch-sensitive controls on top follows the curve of the corner. Frugality prevails on the rear panel, with HDMI, optical digital output and Ethernet all you get.

The BD-H6500's feature list is good. Its crown jewel is the Smart Hub, an internet content portal that offers BBC iPlayer, ITV Player, 4OD and Demand 5, making this the

only deck in the test with a catch-up TV full house.

There's a stellar supporting cast, too, including Netflix, Amazon Instant Video, Blinkbox, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, BBC Sport/News and Samsung's own Video Hub, alongside a varied array of other apps.

If you tire of Samsung's selection, DLNA support lets you stream your own videos, music and photos from PCs, network servers and other connected devices.

Like the LG, Samsung's format support is wide-ranging. It'll stream DivX HD, WMV HD, MKV, AVI, 3GP and MP4 video, plus MP3, WMA, AAC, WAV and FLAC music. It'll even play hi-res FLAC files, but downconverts them to 48kHz. Wi-Fi Direct and screen mirroring are again onboard.

Gentle makeover

Onto the operating system and the Home menu is a gently tweaked version of the BD-F6500's interface. The look is slightly jazzier and more sophisticated. Available content is organised into a series of large panels, with some handy 'recommended' shortcuts along the bottom.

The presentation is great across the board, with liberal use of stylised graphics and pastel colours. It's more hesitant than the LG and Sony machines when searching through DLNA content, however, and despite the presence of a dual core processor the player is occasionally sluggish to respond, particularly just after you've started it up.

The remote doesn't take long to master thanks to its sensible layout and clearly-marked, chunky rubber buttons. The playback keys glow in the dark, too.

In action the BD-H6500 is slick. Boot up is lightning-fast and Blu-ray loading is the quickest of all this quartet, taking just over 20

seconds to start playing *Terminator Salvation*. It also carries out playback commands instantly. None of this may sound like a big deal, but it wasn't long ago that players were taking over a minute to load a disc.

Once your movie gets underway, image quality is stunning. The BD-H6500 fills the screen with intense detail and balanced colours. Blacks are deep and solid, while fast motion is smoothly handled.

Tweaking toolbox

Provided your TV is up to scratch you shouldn't find anything wrong with the deck's default settings, but fire up the Tools menu during playback and there's a choice of picture presets. These include Movie, Standard and Dynamic (avoid the latter) plus a User mode that lets you tweak sharpness, noise reduction, contrast, brightness, colour and green/red tint – fairly thorough for a budget deck ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes
UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
MULTIREGION: No. Region B BD/R2 DVD
HDMI: Yes. 1 x v1.4 output
COMPONENT: No
MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE: No
DIGITAL AUDIO: Yes. 1 x optical output
ETHERNET: Yes
BUILT IN WI-FI: Yes
SACD/DVD-A: No/No
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD DECODING: Yes
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD BITSTREAM: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 360(w) x 40(h) x 196(d)mm
WEIGHT: 1.8kg
FEATURES: Screen mirroring; Wi-Fi Direct; CD multiroom playback with M series speakers; USB port; Movie, Standard, Dynamic presets and User mode; Smart Hub internet portal; DLNA media playback (DivX HD, WMV HD, MKV, AVI, 3GP and MP4 video, plus MP3, WMA, AAC, WAV, FLAC); dual core processor



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A slice of Sony style

This player's eye-catching design and bargain price alone may be enough to tempt buyers



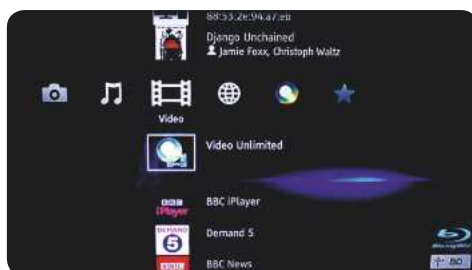
THROW A REGULAR Blu-ray player into Seth Brundle's teleportation pod with a lump of crystal and the BDP-S5200 is what might come out the other end. The jaunty sloping panels on top of this bargain player are inspired by Sony's 'Sense of Quartz' design concept, which, however you may feel about it, offers a refreshing break from the norm. Just don't try putting anything on top of it.

The other stand-out part of the deck's design is its compact size, which is about half the width of a regular BD-spinner. This makes it well suited for use in a bedroom or kitchen, as you can squeeze it onto shelves or smaller TV stands. Just don't expect to be blown away by the build quality – the thin aluminium casing feels flimsy.

What the compact size means, however, is there's not enough room on the front panel for an LED readout, so for all your disc information needs you'll need to hit the Display button on the remote. There's a USB port on the front, though, letting you chow down on media files.

Socketry continues on the rear panel and again there's not much of it – HDMI v1.4, Ethernet and a coaxial digital output, bucking the optical trend of the other decks.

The feature list is attractive, if not exhaustive. It's headlined by the Sony Entertainment Network, a range of music and video services. This selection plays second fiddle to Samsung's portal, as it lacks ITV Player and 4OD, but it does include BBC iPlayer, Demand 5, Netflix, Amazon Instant Video, BBC News, BBC Sport, Sky News, YouTube, vTuner and loads of other niche apps (conciierge.com, anyone?). You can access these from the dedicated SEN interface, or directly from the main menu.



XMB may be gone from Sony's TVs, but it lives on here

DLNA support means you can stream files over your home network, with a list of supported files that includes MKV, AVI, XviD, WMV, AVCHD, MP3, WMA, LPCM and JPEG. You can't stream FLAC or AAC over a network but you can play them via USB. DivX isn't supported at all. My streaming experience was a positive one – it played various video and audio files without any hassle.

There's no 4K upscaling – that kicks in when you step up to the BDP-S6200 or S7200 – but this deck does boast Miracast.

Like the LG and Panasonic, this deck also sticks with a tried and trusted menu system – companies seem reluctant to update them as regularly as they do on their TVs – but it's not hard to see why Sony keeps faith with the slick and intuitive Xross Media Bar. It uses two intersecting axes, with the categories arranged horizontally and the corresponding options vertically. It glides from option to option quickly and smoothly. This menu system is also employed for exploring DLNA and USB content, helping you find what you want quickly. In fact, all of the onscreen menus are excellent, particularly the bright and vibrant SEN screen.

The remote slips neatly into the hand. Netflix gets its own massive red button as does the SEN. If you prefer cutting-edge control, the superb TV SideView app lets you drive the player in a variety of ways and check what's on TV while you're there.

A quick-start mode boots up the deck in seconds and disc loading is fairly fast, firing up *Terminator Salvation* in 33 seconds, while less Java-heavy discs take half that time.

Blu-ray images are sharp, without any nasty artefacts, dodgy colour imbalances or glitches to spoil your enjoyment. The lavish CG-enhanced scenery of ... *Benjamin Button* looks gorgeous, while test patterns on my Silicon Optix HQV BD disc showed smoothness and stability ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes
UPSCALING: Yes. To 1080p
MULTIREGION: No. Region B BD/R2 DVD
HDMI: Yes. 1 x v1.4 output
COMPONENT: No
MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE: No
DIGITAL AUDIO: Yes. 1 x coaxial output
ETHERNET: Yes
BUILT IN WI-FI: Yes
SACD/DVD-A: No/No
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD DECODING: Yes
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD BITSTREAM: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 265(w) x 43(h) x 199(d)mm
WEIGHT: 1.7kg
FEATURES: Super Wi-Fi; Miracast; Wi-Fi Direct; USB port; Brighter and Theatre Room presets; Block and Noise Reduction; Sony Entertainment Network; TV SideView app; Entertainment Database Browser and Gracenote; DLNA media playback (MKV, AVI, XviD, WMV, AVCHD, MP3, WMA, LPCM and JPEG)

Final standings

DISCS MAY BE under threat from video streaming, but Blu-ray players are still an important part of the home entertainment landscape – particularly budget decks like the four on test here. Why? Because they've enthusiastically embraced the online revolution. They don't simply spin hi-def platters like their forebears – they're full-on multimedia hubs, accessing video and music from servers, streaming movies and TV, beaming pictures from smartphones and playing content from USB sticks. In fact, Blu-ray playback is starting to feel like a secondary function...

Many people are therefore snapping up budget decks as a cost-effective way of watching streamed content on a second TV in the bedroom, instead of firing up a laptop or poky tablet. But of course, the beauty is that you also get to enjoy 1080p Blu-ray movies, too.

Whatever your reason for buying, this quartet of decks has shown that you're spoilt for choice when it comes to budget players. All four deliver sparkling hi-def pictures, with loads of neat features, sleek designs and slick menu systems on offer.

A hierarchy has been formed, however, and at the bottom of our pile is Panasonic's DMP-BDT360. It's not a bad player *per se* – in fact, it's a solid, likeable proposition in most areas – but we had trouble streaming media files over a network, the choice of web content is a bit glum, and it's relatively expensive in this

company. It does boast a fast main menu system and a fetching design, though.

Sony's BDP-S5200 is a distinctive compact player with a better range of smart content. Slick menus and hassle-free DLNA streaming also count in its favour. It's not quite good enough to topple the LG BP645, though, which is an impressive all-rounder at a great price. Its slim, stylish design, beautiful onscreen presentation and swift DLNA streaming earn it plenty of Brownie points, while its selection of online apps is excellent – particularly as it's the only deck here to offer Spotify and Now TV.

It shares top spot with Samsung's player, which boasts a good blend of features, design and usability. It's the only deck to offer 4OD and ITV Player, totes other features like screen mirroring and multiroom, and is the quickest to spin a disc. Just ignore the plasticky build ■

STEP UP A LEVEL WITH BD

Better build quality: An easy criticism levelled at affordable Blu-ray players is that their build quality hardly inspires confidence or pride of ownership. However, while heavyweight decks have been absent from the mass market stables for a while, this year both Panasonic and Sony are introducing flagship models that will reign supreme on a rack. And, like rivals from Marantz and Oppo, they will bring performance and feature benefits, too.



Sony BDP-S7200: This £250 deck forms part of Sony's Hi-Res Audio product lineup, and as such offers lossless music playback via a network or USB (as well as Super Audio CD compatibility).



Panasonic DMP-BDT700: Priced around £500, this is Panasonic's most intriguing BD proposition for some time. Features include dual HDMI 2.0 connectivity, 192kHz/32-bit DACs, 7.1-channel analogue outputs and exclusive THX-certified 4K upscaling courtesy of the Uniphier LSI chipset.

HCC VERDICT



LG BP645

→ £100 Approx

→ www.lg.com/uk

→ Tel: 0344 847 5454

HIGHS: Good 'net content including Spotify; fast, hassle-free streaming; gorgeous menus; neat styling

LOWS: Build quality; slower disc loading than rivals; no 4OD, ITV Player or 4K upscaling

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Panasonic DMP-BDT360

→ £140 Approx

→ www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 844 3899

HIGHS: Attractive design; more robust than rivals; two USBs; slick main menu; 4K upscaling feature

LOWS: Slow, niggly DLNA streaming; sluggish apps menu; downconverts some HD video over network

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Samsung BD-H6500

→ £130 Approx

→ www.samsung.co.uk

→ Tel: 0330 726 7864

HIGHS: Market-leading internet content; slim design; impressive operating system; fast disc loading; hassle-free DLNA streaming

LOWS: Lightweight build quality; can be sluggish to respond; tad expensive

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Sony BDP-S5200

→ £100 Approx

→ www.sony.co.uk

→ Tel: 0207 365 2413

HIGHS: Compact, bedroom-friendly design; slick main menu; generous internet content; fast, easy DLNA browsing

LOWS: No ITV Player or 4OD catchup; build quality; no DivX support

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Mainstream master

Samsung's 6 Series LED TV mid-ranger offers all the toys. **Steve May** is happy to play along, even if he really wants something a little bigger for the money



FAR AWAY FROM the high-fashion furore surrounding curved screens lies the real TV market, where you'll find regular folk looking for sensible sets at moderate prices. It's in this homely hinterland that you'll discover the 40in UE40H6400, the 2014 successor to one of last year's most popular televisions.

Also available in 32in, 48in, 55in and 65in screen sizes, this 6 Series set is reassuringly conventional, with its traditional translucent edging and shiny Professor X pedestal. Connectivity is accommodating, with four HDMI, a trio of USBs, an optical digital audio output for use with soundbars, and Wi-Fi.

Naturally the UE40H6400 is net-connected and 3D capable. Samsung's Smart TV platform is polished, although during my audition neither iPlayer or Demand5 were available (hopefully this will have changed by the time you read this). File support from networked devices and local USB is comprehensive. Image quality is crowd-pleasing. The set boasts sharp detail and lush colour reproduction,

courtesy of Samsung's Wide Colour Enhancer Plus processing. The UE40H6400 doesn't embrace absolute black, but Black Tone and Dynamic Contrast controls do help. In *Amazing Spider-Man*, when Spidey surprises the carjacker, engaging Dynamic Contrast (Low or Medium only) improved

delineation on his suit between the black

webbing motif and red costume. The image could be further enhanced by applying the Dark Tone (use the Dark setting) for additional depth. Graded levels of darkness are handled well, with no overt pixel noise. The panel's LED edge-lighting has no obvious uniformity issues, another practical benefit of this screen size.

Subjective motion handling is good, despite the TV only earning Samsung's lowly CMR400 Motion Plus rating. In terms of processing, Motion Plus Clear is the most satisfying preset. This retains a full 1080 lines of moving resolution without overt artefacting. The Motion Plus Custom setting, with Blur reduction set between 8-10, and Judder reduction parked on zero, is similarly effective. Alternatively, just turn Motion Plus off – there's only a moderate drop in moving resolution and the image becomes pleasingly filmic.

The Active 3D performance is less appealing, boasting more ghostly images than *Paranormal Activity*. Given that a 40in screen isn't the best avenue for an immersive 3D experience anyway, this may not matter much.

Sonically, the set delivers an acceptable low-fi audio performance. Digital amplification is rated at 2 x 10W, but this is optimistic. There's not a lot of volume on tap.

Overall this is a well-featured flatscreen with consistently entertaining images. As such, it's a credible challenger to Sony's slightly cheaper 42in W8 series stunner. Well worth an audition ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active Shutter (two pairs of glasses supplied)

4K/ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080

TUNER: Freeview HD

CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; Scart; component/composite video; stereo phono audio inputs; Ethernet; 3 x USB; digital audio optical output; headphone; CI slot

SOUND: 2 x 10W

BRIGHTNESS: N/A

CONTRAST RATIO: 'Mega'

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 918(w) x 535(h) x 49(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 8.2kg

FEATURES: Quad core processor; built-in Wi-Fi; Samsung Smart Control Bluetooth controller; voice interaction; network and USB multimedia playback; Wi-Fi Direct with screen mirroring; football mode; Wide Colour Enhancer Plus processor

HCC VERDICT

Samsung UE40H6400

→ £650 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk

→ Tel: 0330 726 7864

HIGHS: Clean, classic Samsung design; sharp, vibrant HD; polished Smart platform; good motion resolution performance

LOWS: 3D suffers from crosstalk; panel doesn't deliver deep blacks; somewhat pricey for 40in

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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Media eater

This modest-looking networkable player, reckons **Martin Pipe**, is a multimedia powerhouse hampered only slightly by a few usability niggles

Mede8er's player sports a functional, as opposed to stylish, design



MEDE8ER'S MED800X3D NETWORKED multimedia player features a bottom-mounted slot for an internal SATA HDD. It's thus a potentially serious instant media library of your videos, movies, photos and music and, thanks to its compact size, an easily transportable one. The HDD is a cinch to fit, and a device-mode USB 3.0 connector on the side of the case allows the box to be treated as an external drive – great for transferring media to or from a computer. If you do plan to take the MED800X3D travelling, though, don't forget the external power unit.

A convenient collection of buttons resides under a glossy strip. A display would be handy (it would enable the unit to be used for music playback without your TV being powered up, for a start) but you don't get one. Control of the player is possible via third-party smartphone apps, but they're not free (and an Android 'trial' didn't work properly). The standard backlit handset is pleasant enough to handle, but buttons occasionally stick.

Wi-Fi support isn't standard – you can spec it from UK supplier My HTPC, but it bumps up the price to £175. Ethernet is, of course.

Firmware upgrades can't be initiated via a network; installation is instead via USB.

Enough about what the 'base' MED800X3D can't do – there's an awful lot that it can. Firstly, it's bristling with connectivity. You get HDMI (capable of passing HD/3D/24p

video and multichannel audio) as well as component/composite analogue video. Also on offer are an SD card slot and a pair of USB ports, one of which is side-mounted. Then there's the sheer scale of media compatibility.

Every file I tried, with the exception of some ancient DivX/XviD video clips, played perfectly. Among them were HD MKV files, SD/HD broadcast transport streams, FLAC/MP3/AAC/WAV audio, VIDEO_TS DVD rips and ISO images, both Blu-ray and DVD. All DVD menus are preserved, although 'ripped' Blu-rays yield just the content – with HD soundtracks passed via HDMI to your amp.

Then there are all the extras. The MED800X3D, fitted with a hard drive (or purchased with one – the retailer offers capacity up to 4TB) will act as a DLNA or SMB file server. And, naturally, it will play content stored on DLNA, SMB or NFS servers.

The attractive menu system, which is more responsive than many, offers a YouTube function alongside some other apps, including a web browser, BitTorrent, net-radio client, Picasa and Bing. Some web video is accessible, but the lack of a compatible Flash player meant BBC iPlayer was off-limits.

Picture and sound quality proved to be fine, from a myriad of test files. You can even set the refresh rate to match any video files you're playing, although this function should be disabled if you're playing multiple clips (e.g., camera video) or you may miss the first few seconds of each.

In all, the Mede8er MED800X3D is a powerful and flexible networked multimedia player. It's not without its operative niggles, but the advantages of its wide-ranging feature roster more than outweigh my concerns ■

SPECIFICATIONS

- HDD:** Fit or specify your own choice of 3.5in SATA drive (up to 4TB)
- CONNECTIONS:** Ethernet; 2 x host mode USB; 1 x device mode USB; SD card slot; HDMI; composite video; component video; coaxial/optical digital audio; stereo analogue audio
- AUDIO FORMAT SUPPORT:** MP3; WMA; AAC/M4A; APE; OGG; FLAC (up to 24-bit/192kHz); WAV (up to 24-bit/192kHz); AIFF (up to 24-bit/44.1kHz); Dolby Digital/DTS (5.1 passthrough; decode is two-channel/downmix only); TrueHD (passthrough); DTS-HD Master Audio (passthrough)
- VIDEO FORMAT SUPPORT:** MPEG-1; MPEG-2; X.264/H.264 (inc MP4, MKV); MVC; WMV; XviD (not all); MPEG-2 and H.264 off-air transport streams; ISO disc images; VIDEO_TS DVD rips; GIF/JPEG/PNG/BMP still images (with HD support)
- DIMENSIONS:** 225(w) x 60(h) x 160(d)mm
- WEIGHT:** 1kg (without HDD)
- FEATURES:** Provision for onboard HDD with file server functionality; 3D support (MVP/SBS/TB); playlist support (with shuffle/repeat); video upscaling; file browser; media library with search; web browser; Shoutcast internet radio; photo slideshow; 1080p24p support; 750MHz Realtek RTD1186 chipset with 512MB flash memory and 512MB SDRAM; BitTorrent; social media integration; copy between network/SD card/HDD; customisable user interface; Wi-Fi as an optional extra

HCC VERDICT

Mede8er MED800X3D

→ From £150 approx → www.my-htpc.co.uk
→ Tel: 01133 229 496

HIGHS: Flexible; very easy to install and use; access via USB or network to any internal HDD you install; wide support of video and audio

LOWS: Wi-Fi not offered as standard; firmware upgrades via USB only; web browser difficult to drive with supplied handset; no free app control

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Enthusiast-grade media player/server

POSITION: Below the more stylish-looking MED1000X3D

PEERS: Dune HD Base 3D; Popcorn Hour A400

Artcoustic™ Loudspeakers



Cinema design, re-defined

"If you're serious about home cinema at the premium level then these need to be on your shortlist"

"The soundstage created is both wide and deep, able to involve you unhesitatingly in the onscreen action"

"The Artcoustic system has a handy knack of revelling in quiet periods, painting a sonic picture, before bursting into life with shocking dynamism"

Home Cinema Choice, May 2014

Artcoustic Denmark:

DK SHOWROOM (by appointment only)
Tel: +45 32836060
artcoustic@artcoustic.com
www.artcoustic.com

Artcoustic UK and Eire:

UK SHOWROOM (by appointment only)
Tel: +44 (0)1245 400904
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Spitfire 24-12 SL



Reflected glory?

John Archer finds out if a flatscreen TV that doubles up as a mirror when it's switched off can still deliver the home cinema goods

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

42in mirror TV with numerous frame options

POSITION:

Its size means it sits roughly in the centre of the Mirror Media living room range

PEERS:

Sony KDL-40W705; Samsung UE40H7000

AS TELEVISIONS GET bigger, they're taking up ever-increasing amounts of wall real estate, reducing the space available for more traditional stuff like paintings and mirrors. Plus, of course, there are many people out there whose idea of interior design definitely does not include having the living room dominated by the big, black/silver rectangle that normal TVs leave behind when they're switched off.

Cue Mirror Media. This UK company wants to solve the decorative issues associated with normal TVs by providing models that double up as mirrors. It supplies TVs with screens that become mirrors when they're not in use, fitted neatly into a huge range of wooden frame designs. These frames all sit right up to the edge of the picture, creating a much

more convincing mirror and TV effect than would be the case if there was any intermediate border between the screen and the frame.

The screen comes mounted in a tough metal backing case, and fitting it into your chosen frame is no more complicated than pushing the screen's metallic bezel onto four adhesive strips in the recessed part of the wooden frame.

Selecting the set

Naturally I looked at one of Mirror Media's most living room-focused products: the 42in MT42TNE-TTS (26in, 32in, 47in, 55in and 65in variations are also available). But the brand also makes 32in-55in mirror screens with built-in multimedia PCs, and 10.4in-42in

Mirror TVs with demisting technology for bathrooms and wet rooms.

Connectivity on the MT42TNE-TTS includes three HDMI, two USBs, a VGA PC port, a Scart, a component video input, an SPDIF output, a network port and an RS-232 port for system integration (especially important for a custom install-friendly product such as this). You can also attach external speakers via provided spring-type speaker terminals if the built-in 2 x 10W speakers don't float your boat.

The most interesting connection, though, is the wireless receiver built into the TV's rear. This provides Wi-Fi reception of audio and HD pictures from an external transmitter box sat

'Mirror Media wants to solve the decorative issues associated with today's increasingly large flatscreen TVs'

somewhere near your source equipment. Wireless video support is provided for multiple sources via a four-way HDMI splitter attached to the transmitter.

There's an irksome few seconds of delay before the picture appears every time you switch to the TV's wireless video input. But the stability and purity of the wireless transmission were both flawless during my tests.

There are a couple of key limitations with the Mirror TV's connectivity. First, the set doesn't carry built-in Wi-Fi, aside from the wireless HD system. Second, while the set supports DLNA playback via networked devices, it doesn't have any of its own Smart TV features.

Both these omissions are unfortunate. However, in Mirror Media's defence there's a strong likelihood of its TVs predominantly been used merely as displays in wider home entertainment networks able to provide external HD and 'Smart' sources.

Setting the TV up isn't an especially satisfying process. The remote control is the sort you might get with an affordable TV, and there are startlingly few picture adjustments. The zapper might well be replaced by a separate controller in the home of the Mirror TV's target user, but not having any real colour, gamma or white balance management definitely feels out of kilter with the set's custom installation focus – as well as potentially limiting picture performance.

Face to face

As a mirror when turned off, the MT42TNE-TTS works fine. It looks attractive in the 'BES-OAK' frame I was supplied with, and it reflected my ugly mug all too effectively, with

no distortions and less brightness loss than I was expecting.

As a TV, though, the MT42TNE-TTS's combi nature creates some problems. The most predictable of these is that when switched on the screen remains reflective of any light you might have in your room. It's quite unsettling – unless you completely black out your room, watching dark sequences can feel like looking at a double-exposed photo with images of you and the movie blending together. Needless to say this is distracting, particularly if you have any light sources opposite the screen. Managing your environment becomes key.

The amount of light reflected by the screen leads to lost detailing in dark areas. One way to counter the reflectivity is to drive the screen much brighter than any of its picture presets set out to. Yet this has an impact on the picture's black level performance and noise levels.

The screen's native black level performance isn't first-rate either. Armed with the tortuous *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* Blu-ray (see Demo Screen, p24), I noticed a bluish glow over dark scenes, even when using the black level-pushing Movie mode.

There's black crush in dark scenes, too, leaving them looking somewhat hollow and flat. Again, brightening the image helps, but at the expense of true black depth.

You'll also need to call up the Mirror TV's sharpness correction to dial out some noise artefacts – the *Potter* disc's grainy transfer tripped up the screen, creating light sparkles at times, and halos around contrasty edges.

The Full HD image appears nicely sharp, however, and this sharpness isn't badly impacted by motion blur. Colours, meanwhile, are at their best with bright content – especially animated scenes like the final celebrations of Disney's *Frozen* – where vibrancy comes to the fore. Yet during darker scenes, they offer a temperature I'd say is better suited to PC than video use, and there's little adjustment possible to counter this.

The built-in audio is a touch underwhelming, with the dual-driver array offering little in the way of significant bass. Higher frequencies are pushed to the fore.

A mixed bag

Aesthetically, this Mirror Media TV is a hit, turning a flatscreen into an item of furniture in an elegantly simple, flexible and discreet way. Furthermore, I appreciate the system-smoothing wireless transmission implementation – it's something that other TV brands should probably be embracing. However, AV enthusiasts will most likely feel that the picture quality compromises created by making a TV double up as a mirror are too excessive, so mark this down as one for uncritical viewing only ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No
ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes. Standard-definition Freeview and analogue
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI; 2 x USB; component video input; digital audio output; stereo spring-clip speaker ports; CI slot; RS-232; PC port; external wireless HD transmitter with four-way HDMI splitter
SOUND: 2 x 10W
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 700cd/m2
CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): 4,000:1
DIMENSIONS: Depends on frame
WEIGHT (SCREEN ONLY): 25kg
FEATURES: TV becomes a mirror when turned off; multimedia playback support via USB or DLNA; built-in wireless video receiver and provided transmitter; HDMI switcher for wireless video transmitter; can be fitted with wide choice of wooden frames

HCC VERDICT

Mirror Media MT42TNE-TTS

→ £4,275 approx → www.mirrormedia.com
 → Tel: 0870 386 6333

HIGHS: Attractive design; good build quality; wireless video system works well; mirror functionality

LOWS: Picture quality is average; the screen remains reflective when watching TV; built-in speakers don't support loud volumes

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Home cinema

Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D?

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation.

The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance

of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either, as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems

selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level. To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

“ Home cinema
so good you'll believe
you're there! ”



Selecting and installing
home cinema on a
DIY basis may leave
the system performing
at way below its
optimum level.

Confused ?

What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ...don't start with WHAT, start with WHERE. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit you.

Buying or being sold to

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.



The Dealers listed below have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

Our Top20 AV shops in the country

SOUTH

Chelmsford

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

216 Moulsham Street.
01245 265245
www.rayleighhifi.com

Maidenhead

AUDIO VENUE

36 Queen Street.
01628 633995
www.audiovenue.com

Norwich

MARTINS HI-FI

85-91 Ber Street.
01603 627134
www.martinhifi.co.uk

Rayleigh, Essex

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

44a High Street.
01268 779762

CUSTOM INSTALL DEPT.

01268 776932
www.rayleighhifi.com

Southend-on-Sea

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

132/4 London Road.
01702 435255
www.rayleighhifi.com

LONDON

Ealing

AUDIO VENUE

27 Bond Street.
020 8567 8703
www.audiovenue.com

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI

190a New North Road.
020 7226 5500
www.grahams.co.uk

SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS

61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea.
020 7924 2040
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

MIDLANDS

Coventry

FRANK HARVEY HI-FI EXCELLENCE

163 Spon Street.
024 7652 5200
www.frankharvey.co.uk

Nottingham

CASTLE SOUND & VISION

48/50 Maid Marian Way.
0115 9584404
www.castlesoundvision.com

NORTH

York

SOUND ORGANISATION

2 Gillygate.
01904 627108
www.soundorg.co.uk



The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

www.top20uk.info



STAR QUALITIES

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
SERVICE ★★★★★
FACILITIES ★★★★★
VERDICT ★★★★★

...Talk to the experts

One-box audio with a retro feel

Mark Craven clears the decks for a largescale wireless speaker with vintage styling

JBL'S NEW AUTHENTICS L16

wireless speaker casts a loving gaze to a bygone era when audio equipment was big, bold and draped in wood. It's an imposing proposition, measuring 80cm long, weighing 16kg and priced at £900, and takes aim at the premium end of the one-box market.

The L16 is a three-way design, employing two 1in tweeters, two 2in mid-range drivers and two 5.25in woofers, driven by half-a-dozen 50W amps. Connectivity of the wired variety includes 3.5mm, stereo phonos, USB and digital optical; cable-phobes can make use of its AirPlay, DLNA and Bluetooth talents. Essentially, however you store your music, the JBL will handle it. Additional features include Clari-Fi compressed audio enhancement, device charging via USB or a top-mounted plate for



Qi-standard phones/tablets, and control via JBL's MusicFlow app. A floorstand is an optional extra should your regular furniture not be suitable.

Loud and proud

The L16 goes loud without batting an eyelid. The soundstage crafted from its driver array is large, too, easily filling my room in a way that many wireless speakers only dream of. Those dual bass drivers provide depth and body to

The L16 offers a tank-like build quality

music, and Clari-Fi works as advertised, coaxing more life out of streamed MP3 files when activated. Step up to better quality material and the JBL's clear high-frequencies come to the fore.

Used as a soundbar, the L16 nails clean dialogue but, let's be honest, it's a tad large to really function in this method. And its price tag is hard to stomach ■

HCC VERDICT

JBL Authentics L16 → £900

Overall ★★★★★

GOODMANS GS103TZH → Approx £50

Freesat for the masses

Grant Rennell adds subscription-free satellite TV to his setup with a plug-and-play HD box

IF YOU WANT HD and SD Freesat channels on the cheap and aren't too fussed by its next-gen Freetime service, this HD set-top box from Goodmans may fit the bill. Particularly as it retails for just £50.

It's very small with no graphical display up front – just an LED indicator – but makes a stab at style with its partially-bevelled top. The rear panel includes an HDMI output, RGB-capable Scart output, Ethernet port and a (service-only) USB port.

The 7-day EPG is pretty standard for a non-Freetime box with genre sorting (e.g HD only) ability for channels, but you can't use it to view those in your favourites list only. Grr. The box will let you tune into free channels not on Freesat, but no EPG is provided for these.

Connect the Goodmans to the 'net and you can stream TV from BBC iPlayer (including 'high quality' streams) and ITV Player. The UI for both isn't as hi-res looking as the box's own but again there are sorting options and

controlling playback using the remote is relatively easy.

I wasn't bowled over by it, but 1080p upscaling ability via HDMI ensured most standard-def as well as HD broadcasts looked acceptably sharp on a 42in Panasonic plasma. If you're planning to use the Scart output, however, both RGB and (predictably) composite images appeared rather soft on the same TV.

The Goodmans' ease-of-use, good picture and smattering of catchup content make for a decent-enough budget buy. Just don't expect much in the way of flair ■



This budget box still offers catchup TV

HCC VERDICT

Goodmans GS103TZH → £50

Overall ★★★★★

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OPPO BDP-103D

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COME AND AUDITION. Call to make an appointment now!

Putting a picture on a pedestal

John Archer has fun with a quirky, ultra-portable projector

IT'S NOT OFTEN I'm inclined to doff my hat to the designers of an AV product, but the BEM Kickstand certainly deserves such a show of respect. This ultra-portable projector emerges from its carry bag flat, but folds out around a robust hinge so that it's supported by a sturdy easel-like stand, with the projector tiltable to help you get its pictures correctly positioned on your wall or screen. Cool.

Also cool is the way the Kickstand's remote slots into a recess over the lens when the unit's in transit. This keeps the remote safe while simultaneously protecting the lens.

Fortunately, considering its slightly high £500 price tag, design isn't the Kickstand's only attraction. Its connections are numerous and flexible enough to support both home and office use, and this flexibility is backed up by its picture performance.

The Kickstand's contrast talents are surprising, given my general experience with ultra-small projectors. Dark scenes, like the one

where Solomon is first beaten by his captors in *12 Years a Slave*, combine an acceptable black level response with high brightness. There's even some shadow detail in dark backgrounds, which is very rare on these dinky designs.

The Kickstand's pictures are bright enough, too, to comfortably support images up to 80in, and its 1,280 x 800 resolution helps produce an exceptionally detailed, crisp picture. This sharpness works a treat with PC presentations as well as Blu-ray video.

Stretching exercises

Stopping the Kickstand from bagging an unreserved recommendation are its native 16:10 rather than 16:9 aspect ratio, which leaves images looking marginally stretched, and a slightly washed-out and yellowish look to *12 Years a Slave*'s gorgeous evocation of America's Deep South. But as an all-round proposition the Kickstand remains an innovative temptation ■



HCC VERDICT

BEM Kickstand → £500

Overall ★★★★★

HUAWEI DN371T → Approx £220

Huawei the lads!

Danny Phillips rolls out the bad Geordie puns for this YouView PVR audition

TV PLATFORM YOUVIEW launched in 2012 and has impressed with its unification of over-the-air and net-delivered content. Manufacturer Huawei was responsible for the first wave of Talk Talk-branded boxes – the DN371T sees its hardware available on the open market.

One of the main strengths of Huawei's PVR is its design. This is a smart-looking unit that puts other set-top boxes to shame, with an eye-catching front panel lightshow and smoothly rounded corners. This neatness is replicated within the user interface.

Connections are HDMI, Scart, optical digital audio and Ethernet. There's no Wi-Fi, annoyingly, and the USB inputs are for service use only.

Inside are two digital terrestrial tuners, linked to a 500GB hard disk drive. This is where the DN371T stumbles a bit, as while you're taking advantage of the series link and twin-channel recording features, you'll have one eye on the remaining HDD space. Rival YouView stalwart Humax offers PVRs with 1TB and 2TB capacity, for not a great deal more than the Huawei's £220 asking price.

Of course, YouView is more about VOD than archiving, and the DN371T offers the usual backwards EPG to trawl available

content from its variety of channel partners (including the four UK majors plus Dave, Really and, if you subscribe, Now TV).

In use this box is generally quick. Channel-hopping can throw up some slight delays, but elsewhere its responsive to commands from the handset (or YouView app). HD material is sharp and impactful. Standard-def delivery is weaker, though, with noise and artefacting blighting your enjoyment.

Essentially, this is a perfectly adequate PVR with a glam design, but the relatively small hard drive and lack of Wi-Fi hookup might make you look elsewhere ■



HCC VERDICT

Huawei DN371T → £220

Overall ★★★★★

The front lights change colour according to status

Air Powered Performance



Sound-tuned by the illustrious Air Studios, the SC-LX87 brings studio quality sound and the pinnacle of performance with effortless Class D amplification.



Enjoy app control with iControlAV2013, 4K Ultra HD pass-through and upscaling, high resolution audio via USB-DAC, USB and network connection. Multi-zone capabilities also extend entertainment throughout the home.

Pioneer

www.pioneer.co.uk





Recording, playing, streaming machine

Oh yes. There's an awful lot this Samsung deck can do. But there are some things it can't.

Danny Phillips wonders if the BD-H8900 offers enough to warrant its price tag

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
1TB Smart PVR and
3D Blu-ray player

POSITION:
Joins the 500GB
BD-H8500

PEERS:
Humax DTR-T1010;
Panasonic
DMR-BWT740;
LG HR939M

FROM LASERDISC PLAYERS that also spin CDs to Blu-ray/DVD/VHS recorders, combis have been part of the home entertainment landscape for decades. Their appeal is easy to understand. Stuffing two or more different products into a single chassis means fewer boxes in packed AV racks, while all the functions are controlled from a single interface and remote control.

Although not as prevalent as they used to be, a few companies still keep the combi flag flying. One of them is Samsung, whose BD-H8900 is a Freeview HD recorder and 3D Blu-ray player bundled up in a single box. Panasonic and LG also make similar models.

It's an updated version of last year's BD-F8900 with a new-look user interface and multiroom functionality in conjunction with Samsung's new M series of wireless speakers. At £330 it's not cheap, but check the spec and it starts to make sense. You're getting a dual-tuner Freeview recorder with a 1TB HDD and a hi-def disc spinner with 4K upscaling into the bargain – not to mention Samsung's Smart Hub and more wireless network functionality than you can shake a router at.

The exterior design is identical to the BD-F8900, retaining the curved right-hand corner and gloss-black bodywork. At 55mm high, this deck is a far cry from the chunky DVD/VCRs from which it descends, and should therefore slot into shelves with little fuss. Styling is moody and minimal. Only a small

LED display, covered USB port and skinny disc tray adorn the fascia. A round panel of touch-sensitive controls sits on top.

However, like most Blu-ray decks designed for mass-market consumption, the BD-H8900's build quality is disappointing. The plasticky finish, lightweight bodywork and lack of overall sturdiness left me underwhelmed, particularly when I stacked it on top of an Oppo BDP-105D with its majestically robust casing. Sure, the Oppo costs three times as much, but it underlines the sort of sacrifices you have to make when buying budget.

Bare back side

Rear connections are boiled down to the minimum – HDMI and optical digital audio outputs, Ethernet and a second USB port that lets you connect an external HDD for extra recording space.

The deck's 1TB hard disk holds 257 hours of hi-def programmes or 411 hours of SD. And the recording mode is set in stone so you can't trade off picture quality for recording time.

Dual Freeview HD tuners afford you great flexibility, letting you watch a third channel while two others are being recorded, and you're not limited to channels on the same multiplex either. You can't visit the Settings menu while recording, but nothing else is off-limits. Naturally you get a wide range of classic PVR trickplay features, such as pause/rewind live TV and series link, while

a range of helpful alerts and dialogue boxes keep you abreast of recording clashes and series options.

Elsewhere the BD-H8900 has plenty of tricks. Most obvious is its great range of online apps, which can be accessed via the built-in Wi-Fi connection. VOD comprises the same heady channel roster found on the BD-H6500 group test winner (see page 56), yet this deck's PVR status means the S Recommendation feature (which tries to learn your viewing habits and suggests content) is added.

'Samsung's EPG is one of the best around – everything you need on a single screen but still uncluttered'

As well as the ability to stream media from devices on a home network – including MKV, AVCHD, DivX and even FLAC (hi-res files of the latter are downconverted to 48kHz) – the new multiroom feature lets you play a CD and beam it to Samsung's M series speakers using its Android/iOS Multiroom App. Sadly this feature wasn't available at the time of testing. You can also rip CDs direct to the hard drive.

All these goodies are nestled in a new-look UI that I didn't have any trouble getting to grips with. It's pretty much the same layout as the 2013 menus but with a new colour scheme and more elaborate graphics. There's a sense of fun here, using poster art, logos and illustrations wherever possible.

I think Samsung's EPG is one of the best around, for the simple reason that it crams everything you need into a single screen without ever feeling cluttered. There's a live TV screen in the corner, and a seven-channel programme grid with the synopsis at the bottom. Handy shortcuts make it easy to filter channels and edit favourites, and it's complemented by

an onscreen banner that lets you scan the full schedule while you're watching a programme.

However, having played with several YouView and Freetime PVRs, which combine broadcast TV and online catch-up services in a single EPG, Samsung's rigid segregation of its Freeview functionality and Smart content feels weirdly old-fashioned these days.

More pressing gripes concern occasionally sluggish cursor movement (despite the presence of a dual-core processor), a slow, awkward web browser and the Recorded TV menu, which involves too much faffing about to display all the recordings on the same screen. PVRs like Pure's Avalon 300R are smoother in use.

Hi-def Freeview picture quality is up to scratch – the stark Minnesotan landscapes of *Fargo* on Channel 4 HD are sharp and punchy, with plenty of subtle detail and shading within the snow. As characters trudge through the whiteness, their outlines are crisply drawn. The image has a rich, forceful quality that also benefits from good contrast and practically no noise to speak of. Archived to the HDD, it plays out with no discernible drop in quality.

So does all this make the BD-H8900 worth buying? Sort of. Aside from the addition of a niche multiroom CD function and a lick of paint for the menu system, the BD-H8900 is near identical to its predecessor, which means you might as well pick up the 2013 model at a lower price. Furthermore, some may expect this deck to enable archiving to Blu-ray disc, which it doesn't. For that sort of retro functionality, Panasonic's DMR range is required.

Still, this lack of progression shouldn't detract from the fact that the BD-H8900 is generally impressive. Build quality leaves a lot to be desired, but overall this proves there may be life in the old combi yet ■

ON THE MENU

→ There's plenty of visual allure to the BD-H8900's menus, and the layout makes it straightforward to find the features/content you want. However, some aspects are hindered by sluggish operation – particularly the web browser – as if the Samsung is collapsing under the weight of its own multifunctional skills

SPECIFICATIONS

HDD: Yes. 1TB

TUNER: Yes. 2 x Freeview HD

CONNECTIONS: HDMI v1.4 output; optical audio output; Ethernet; 2 x USB; CI slot; RF input and loopthrough

DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 55(h) x 282(d)mm

WEIGHT: 2.6kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; multiroom support with M5 series wireless speakers; 3D Blu-ray playback; 4K upscaling; media playback from USB and DLNA (AVCHD, DivX HD, MKV, WMV, JPEG, WAV, AAC, MP3, WMA, FLAC, MPO, JPEG); Dolby TrueHD & DTS-HD Master Audio decoding; Smart Hub with BBC iPlayer, ITV Player, 4OD and Demand 5; web browser; EPG; Series Link; screen mirroring; iOS/Android remote app; Wi-Fi Direct; CD ripping; record two channels and watch a third



The BD-H8900 can operate as part of Samsung's new multiroom ecosystem

HCC VERDICT

Samsung BD-H8900

→ £330 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk

→ Tel: 0330 726 7864

HIGHS: Envious feature lineup; generous apps; solid HD picture quality; flexible recording; attractive, user-friendly menus and EPG

LOWS: Lightweight build quality; clunky web browser; segregated Smart and Freeview functionality; no BD archiving

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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DIGITAL COPY

With 4K on the way and streaming taking hold, **Mark Craven** is wondering whether the writing is on the wall for timeshifted TV channels

IF, LIKE ME, you've moved beyond the free-to-air platforms for your TV fix, either through cable or satellite, then you'll know that there's an awful lot of odd programming lurking in some of the darkened corners of the EPG. My satellite package runs to more than 650 TV and radio channels, and occasionally I like to strap myself into the sofa and trawl through all of them, checking up on anything I may have missed and wondering who actually watches the Craft Extra channel (668 on Sky, if you're wondering).

Recently, I discovered the existence of Channel 5+24. This channel, just to explain, essentially repeats what was broadcast, peak-time, on Channel 5 yesterday (not to be confused with Yesterday, which is ostensibly a history channel but prefers to show episodes of *Flog It!* and *Coast* instead). Channel 5+24 has replaced Channel 5*+1, a timeshift version of the 5* channel that's been rebranded twice since launch and, as far as I can tell, mainly shows repeats of things that were shown on Channel 5 about a year ago.

As you can see, for Channel 5 fans, it's all a bit hard to keep up with – but such is the nature of broadcast TV in 2014. There are people presumably earning very good money at TV networks to make very peculiar decisions. Take, for instance, the newly-launched ITV Encore channel. This isn't available on free-to-air platforms, but Sky subscribers heading to channel 123 can tuck into its collection of programmes – programmes that (during its initial weeks at least) have all been broadcast on free-to-air TV already. Hmmmm.

Why the demand?

The sheer length of my EPG does raise one question: surely, in this age of net-delivered television,

shouldn't the trend be towards less, not more, TV channels? And with on-demand services like Netflix going from strength to strength, how long before the viewing figures dip below the point where advertisers walk away?

Where broadcast platforms can ensure that viewing figures tick over is by offering quality, as well as choice. Sky's original programming, wide-ranging sports coverage, well-curated US imports, commitment to HD and extensive movie collection is what, I assume, keeps its subscription numbers up, not the sheer multitude of channels.

This brings me inevitably to 4K. Both Sky and the BBC are making progress towards an ultra hi-def broadcast future. Last year the forward-thinking satcaster filmed and aired (internally) a Premier League match in 4K, and the Beeb is airing select World Cup games (again internally) via both DTT and IP technology. For me **this resolution leap can't come soon enough – the difference between 1080i and 2160p is startling** – and I imagine it will catch the eye of consumers, too, in the same way that HD did nearly a decade ago.

The technology is clearly moving forward, and the 4K TV base in the UK is growing, too. Obviously there are huge cost implications, but that hasn't stopped the likes of Sky in the past from introducing new formats. Yet what would be a massive shame is if there wasn't enough bandwidth available for a 4K future because it was taken up by multiple showings of *Extreme Fishing with Robson Green*. Sky could retire half of its library of channels, still charge the same price, and it wouldn't make a difference to me if 4K was on the agenda ■

*Would you swap 10 SD channels for one 4K channel?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Mark Craven's only experience of 'extreme fishing' is when he managed to catch his own elbow on a barbed fishhook and had to go to the emergency doctor





FILM FANATIC

In the wake of H.R. Giger's death, **The Beek** reflects on the impact that the surrealist artist's work for the sci-fi horror masterpiece *Alien* had on his life...

THE SAD NEWS that Swiss artist Hans Ruedi Giger had passed away arrived just as the last issue of *HCC* was going to press, too late for anything other than a mention in the Ed's Letter. While plenty has already been written elsewhere about Giger's legacy in the weeks following his death, I won't let that stop me adding my own thoughts.

Like most film fans, the first time I ever came into contact with Giger's work was courtesy of Ridley Scott's sci-fi horror masterpiece *Alien*, although having only been born four years before the film stunned viewers at the box office, I had to wait until July 25, 1984 and its second screening on UK television to come face-to-face with his most famous creation.

I watched the film on a portable black-and-white TV in my parents' bedroom, while they played dominos with the neighbours downstairs. Despite this less-than-impressive AV setup, the effect it had on my young brain was electrifying. Having been brought up on a steady diet of vintage sci-fi and horror flicks, **by the age of nine I was convinced that I had already seen the most terrifying creatures that cinema could unleash. It took *Alien* to show me just how wrong I was.**

I clearly wasn't alone. The following day at school it was all that those of us who had seen it could talk about. As you might expect, it wasn't long, though, before our childish minds returned to more pressing concerns, like jumping on our Grifter bikes to restage *Return of the Jedi*'s speeder bike chase on a nearby piece of scrubland. But even this couldn't completely scrub the memory of *Alien*'s nightmarish images from my grey matter.

Not long after I finally became aware of H.R. Giger himself, following a visit to Liverpool with my

parents. It was there, in a shop specialising in remaindered books, that I discovered a discounted copy of Paul Scanlon and Michael Gross's *The Book of Alien*.

While Marvel UK's *Star Wars Weekly* comics sometimes ran behind-the-scenes pieces about the making of that sci-fi saga, never before had I encountered a tome charting the making of a movie from concept to completion. More than anything else it was *The Book of Alien* that began my fascination with filmmaking and started me on the path towards cinema obsession.

Musical xenomorphs!

As fascinating as I found the production sketches by the likes of Moebius and Ron Cobb, it was the parts of *The Book of Alien* that dealt with H.R. Giger's impossible creatures and spooky landscapes that really sparked my imagination. So even though the book itself didn't survive the passage of time, my love of Giger's art endured. The disappointment of seeing what Hollywood did with his work for *Poltergeist II* and then *Species* couldn't dull my enthusiasm. And why should it? His original designs (and those for *Alien*'s 'musical xenomorph' and *Batman Forever*'s organic Batmobile) were always available to be savoured courtesy of the large-format artwork albums that could be found in most book shops.

So, whether it's on the bigscreen or the printed page, there's always been something about Giger's art that gets me going. And, given the influences that his designs for *Alien* continue to have on movie-makers around the world, I think the same is true of a lot of other people, too ■

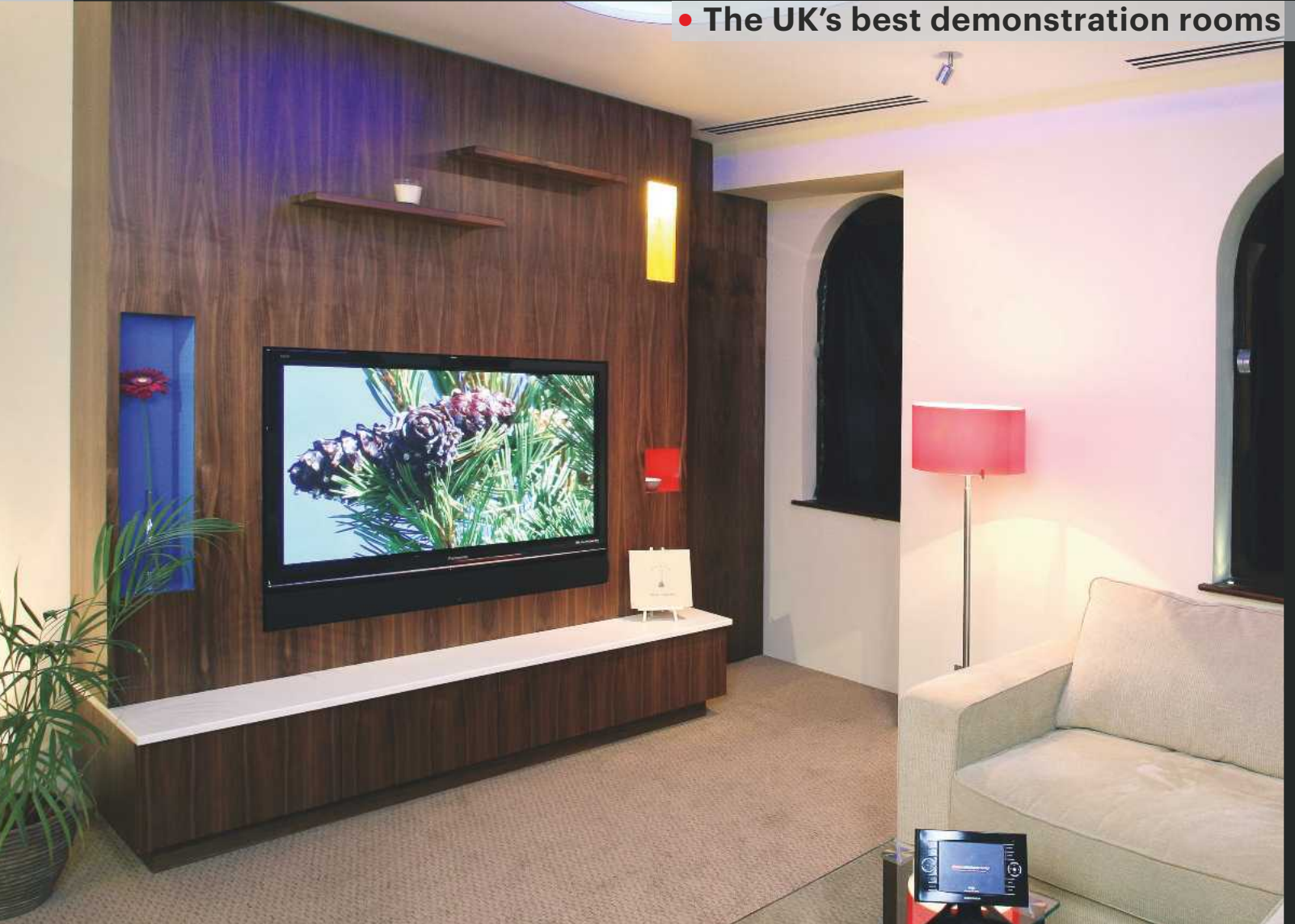
*What films do you remember from your childhood?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Anton van Beek is such a massive Giger fan that he regularly watches *Species* solely to take in the film's creature effects. Or so he tells his other half...



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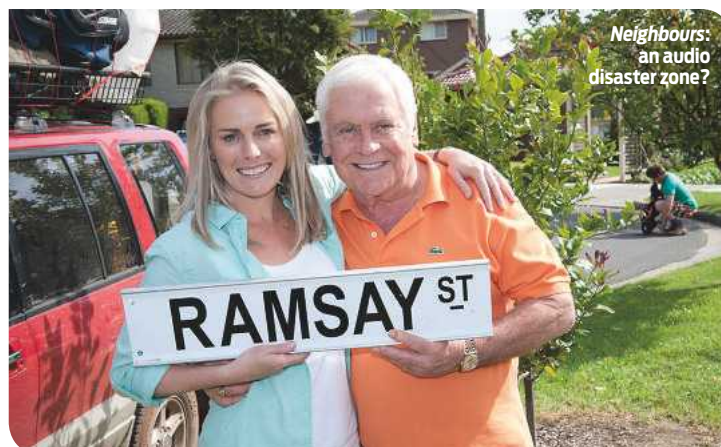
Noisy Neighbours

I have no doubt that *HCC*'s Richard Stevenson would never dream of watching the programme *Neighbours* on Channel 5. I watch it because my wife and I are lunching about that time – so I have no choice.

But supposing you did accidentally tune in, you would find that the sound, for both the lunchtime and afternoon broadcasts, is irritatingly bad. Channel 5, or the Australian studio that makes the programme, appear to be using some kind of device which makes all background sounds and noise annoyingly and unnaturally audible. Footsteps, for example, sound almost like thunderclaps and background levels go up or

down depending on whether or not someone is speaking. Who are the target audience who 'benefit' from such processing?

Some three or four years ago I was so annoyed by the sound quality on *Neighbours* that I wrote to Channel 5 to complain. They replied that they had some problems in their transmission suite that they had not yet sorted out. It seemed to me a bit of a story, but eventually there came some kind of improvement. However, today's sound quality is quite beyond the pale and I can see no reason for it being so. An explanation would be welcome as would a promise not to mess with the sound quality but rather to allow natural sound to be transmitted.



I have a background in broadcast engineering.
T. M. Goodwin, via email

Richard Stevenson replies: I haven't watched *Neighbours*

since the glory days of Jim Robinson, but I remember even then that the incessant sound of chirping birds in Ramsay Street was annoying. Might the poor sound quality be down

★ STAR LETTER...

From LaserDisc all the way to Blu-ray

I totally sympathise with Mark Craven's column entitled *Digital Copy* (*HCC* #235). I shudder to think how many copies of the same movie I've purchased over the years on different formats.

Like Mark, I too began collecting movies on VHS, but then in 1993 I moved over to LaserDisc after having seen a demonstration of *Star Wars Trilogy – The Definitive Collection*. This was a very expensive affair. 99 per cent of my LaserDiscs were American imports. A standard disc could set you back over £30, and collectors' editions could be £100 or more. I soon added a Yamaha Dolby Digital AV receiver and I was hooked on home cinema from then on.

In the mid '90s I would take my annual holiday in Los Angeles, California, and would trawl

around Dave's Video – The Laser Place in Studio City, Ken Crane's LaserDisc in Westminster, and Virgin & Tower Records on Sunset Boulevard looking for LaserDisc bargains. Those were the days. Sadly these businesses are all gone. There were some stunning LaserDisc releases done during this time, at the height of Lucasfilm's THX influence. By the end of the 90s my LaserDisc collection ran to a few hundred titles.

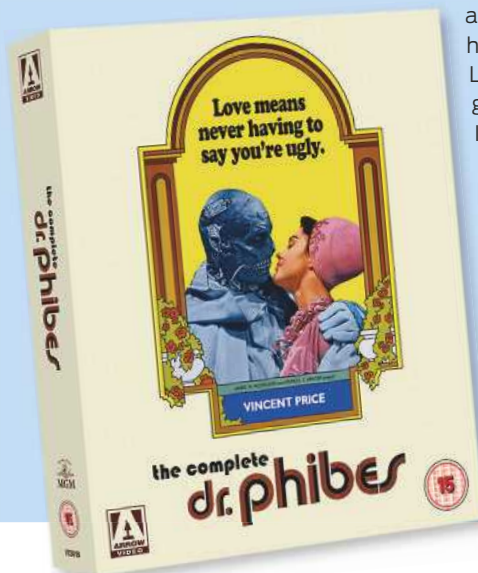
In 1999 I purchased my first DVD player from The Good Guys store on Laurel Canyon, Studio City (also now gone out of business). This was a costly Region 1/NTSC-only Pioneer unit – I had to pay VAT and

import duty on it when re-entering the UK at Heathrow. All my DVDs were Region 1 NTSC imports, mostly purchased through dvdboxoffice.com and playusa.com. I prefer NTSC over PAL

movie releases anywhere – no raise in audio pitch.

Once I had a DVD player, I started replacing all my classic LaserDisc movies on DVD. While the picture quality on DVD was far better, I really missed the artwork and sheer impressiveness that had gone into producing LaserDiscs. We'll never see such great releases again. Eventually I got a Pioneer multi-region DVD player, so I could also collect UK-only releases – mainly classic TV series. I think my DVD collection peaked at just under 1,000 titles.

For a brief period (starting around late 2006), I had an HD DVD player for the Xbox 360. I only had a couple of dozen HD DVD titles, before it was clear that it was game over for the format.





Man of Steel: a picture quality favourite on Blu

to woefully cheap production values? I've never been to the *Neighbours* set but everything looks like it's held together by Blu-tack.

HD quality concerns

Can someone tell me why HD transmissions are so variable? Years ago I saw a test reel of HD

on a Pioneer 42in Kuro – the results were stunning, and this is the yardstick I use.

I now have Sky Movies and Sky Sports due to Virgin Media doing a great half-price deal. How disappointed am I? I have now seen *Man of Steel* on Sky and Blu-ray and the quality from Sky doesn't come close to the vibrant

palette on a BD. Likewise, sports coverage is very mixed – football coverage can be little better than SD transmissions, but Eurosport HD transmissions of the Giro Italia Cycling were excellent. The best HD images on TV I have seen are 1080p streams of *Breaking Bad* on Netflix.

The whole point of my letter is: is this what is in store for 4K? I have recently seen my 'yardstick' of 4K courtesy of the Sony Centre and it is truly stunning with the depth of 3D and crystal clarity. But with the state of HD transmissions, should I spend £3,000 on a new TV?

David Green, via email

Martin Pipe replies: Much of the reason for the relatively poorer quality you notice through direct comparison is that broadcast HD bitrates are much lower than Blu-ray – 10Mbps (sometimes higher for sport) against 40Mbps. In addition, there's an awful lot of processing that takes place between the playout/source and your set-top box – such as mixers, encoders and (in the case of live sport) outside-broadcast links. To be honest, it's amazing HD broadcasting looks as good as it does. It should also be borne in mind that you would normally view Blu-ray movies at 1080p24

– as they're made, and as they're stored on the disc. HD broadcasts employ the 1080i format, which means that movies acquired for broadcast have to be converted from progressive-scan format to interlaced (your player does this internally if you've set the video output to 1080i; note that the conversion equipment used by broadcast professionals for this purpose will be far superior!). Converting progressive to interlaced reduces the amount of information that needs to be carried – and the emphasis of digital broadcast tends to be on quantity of channels over quality – but it impacts vertical definition, and artefacts can be visible (good TV picture processing helps here).

Thanks to a technique known as 'statistical multiplexing', transponder/multiplex bandwidth tends to be allocated in such a way that channels carrying fast-moving and thus bitrate-intensive material (like sports coverage) are favoured. This doesn't always work – when, for example, most or all of the channels concerned are broadcasting material of this nature.

As for the quality of 4K broadcasts we'll have to wait and see – trials have

My first Blu-ray player was purchased in 2007. It was a Multi-Zone/Multi-Region Pioneer BDP-LX70A – a very expensive purchase at the time. It was a great player, but so slow at mounting Blu-ray discs compared with the players we have today.

Since then, I've been an avid collector of Blu-ray releases (only 2D – I have no interest in 3D). I went through a number of Blu-ray player replacements quite quickly, before settling on the Pioneer BDP-LX55 which I have today. I need a universal player, as I also have quite a collection of SACD discs (another format that didn't really take off).

Today, my Blu-ray collection stands at 372 discs, and DVD collection stands at 633 discs. There's quite a large number of classic BBC TV series that were

only ever shot on SD video, so DVD is good enough for them. Recently, I've been targeting new releases, rather than replacing old DVD movies with Blu-rays.

I like to collect physical discs and see them on my shelves – for me, streaming just isn't the same. Although it does have its place.

James Willmott, via email

Mark Craven replies: Thanks James – so you currently have over 1,000 DVDs/Blu-rays? We'd love to see some photographs showing how you're managing to store them all – we need tips!

Star letter-writer James wins *The Complete Dr. Phibes* Blu-ray boxset, which is available to buy now from Arrow Video.

recently begun. Thankfully, though, all 4K formats are progressively-scanned.

TV audio – we need 5.1!

I thoroughly agree with Richard Stevenson in his article about the sound quality of UK drama [POV, HCC #235]. Why, after years of Dolby Digital and DTS, mixes are we still subject to bog-standard stereo mixes? From *Downton Abbey* to almost every single BBC drama we still get a boring, ineffective 2.0 mix. I remember a few years ago the BBC announcing they were working on their own multichannel sound mixing and it was supposed to be better and more immersive than Dolby Digital (I believe they didn't want to pay Dolby)!

So what's happened? How can we produce such great-quality drama, with wonderful picture quality, and yet not take a bit more effort and add a 5.1 surround mix? I know a lot of people still watch everyday TV in stereo but at least we'd have the high-quality mix for



Is the popularity of soundbars killing the drive for 5.1 broadcasts?

the Blu-ray and digital downloads, for people like you and me who do watch everything through a full surround system!

Ian C, via email

Richard Stevenson replies:
Thanks for thoroughly agreeing with me – I thoroughly agree with you!

So why are we not getting TV surround mixes? As with almost

everything, I expect the answer lies in cost. Creating a multichannel mix for broadcast, or even just for a Blu-ray or digital download release, is just another expense to add to the balance sheet.

However, I recall a few years ago that the BBC was investing a lot of research and development cash into 3D broadcast trials – in hindsight,

perhaps it would have been better if it had spent that money on sound production.

Now, though, the Beeb has rightly turned its focus toward 4K and beyond. Why rightly? Because this is where consumer interest is (or, rather, will be). The popularity of soundbars in the UK is proof that for most people it's the quality (and indeed volume) of audio that's

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Helix: Season 1

This thrilling sci-fi series follows a group of scientists investigating the outbreak of a deadly new virus at a top-secret research station in the Arctic. Sony Pictures is bringing *Helix: Season 1*

to DVD on June 30 and we've got five copies of the three-disc set to give away.

Question:

Helix producer Ronald D. Moore was behind which re-imagined sci-fi series?

Answer:

A) Battlestar Galactica B) Knight Rider C) Bionic Woman

Email your answer with '**Helix: Season 1**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



Non-Stop

Get ready for thrills and spills at 30,000 feet in this new action-thriller starring HCC-favourite Liam Neeson, which touches down on DVD and Blu-ray on June 30 thanks to

StudioCanal UK. If you fancy getting caught up in the adventure yourself, we've got five Blu-rays up for grabs!

Question:

Liam Neeson and director Jaume Collet-Serra previously worked together on which film?

Answer:

A) Unforgiven B) Underworld C) Unknown
Email your answer with '**Non-Stop**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



Her

Spike Jonze's critically-acclaimed sci-fi rom-com about a man who falls in love with the artificial intelligence powering his computer's operating system recently made

its debut on DVD and Blu-ray. To celebrate, Entertainment in Video has given us five copies of the Blu-ray to give away...

Question:

Spike Jonze previously directed an adaptation of which famous children's book?

Answer:

A) Where the Wild Things Are B) The BFG C) The Very Hungry Caterpillar
Email your answer with '**Her**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

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important, not the wraparound nature of 5.1.

Pure Audio needs new titles

Hi. I read with interest in your last issue the article on Blu-ray Pure Audio discs. Coincidentally, on the same day that *Home Cinema Choice* came out, I had received Genesis' *Selling England By The Pound* on the 'new' BD format. I was very impressed with the sound quality, but I feel that this format is destined to go the same way as all the other hi-def audio formats – a lack of up-to-date releases and too high a price. I have about five DVD-Audio discs and the same on Super Audio CD, the best being Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon* – a truly awesome-sounding release.

I am seeing the same tired old releases on this new format, and like I said, at too high a price (£19.99 for some releases). I would love to hear artists such as Faithless and Moby, whose tracks are crying out to be remastered in 5.1.

On another point – one of my favourite ghost movies of all time

is the 1980 George C Scott film *The Changeling*. Does anyone know if this underrated gem of a movie will ever see the light of day on Blu-ray? Hopefully remastered in 4K!

Also I was hoping that when the last Faithless concert movie, *Passing The Baton*, was released a couple of years ago it would have come out on Blu-ray. Any chance it might still happen (maybe with *Live At Alexander Palace* tagged on as well)?
Paul, Plymouth

Anton van Beek replies: *The Changeling* (not to be confused with the Clint Eastwood-directed drama starring Angelina Jolie that has the same name) is indeed a great little chiller, but sadly has never been released on Blu-ray.

The current Region 2 DVD release (issued in 2008) comes via European distributor StudioCanal. I would suggest this means that an eventual BD release isn't a complete no-go, as StudioCanal seems to have an appreciation of

cult movies that other, bigger studios lack. But don't count on it – particularly a 4K restoration!

As for Faithless, their farewell Brixton concert was released on DVD with a 5.1 mix in 2012, so it seems odd that BD wasn't an option. With the band no longer fully active, I'd rate it unlikely that a re-release is on the cards.

Pure Audio needs new titles II

Good article in your last issue on the Pure Audio discs. I have four of these titles so far. The only multichannel disc I have is Queen's *A Night at the Opera*. Sadly that disc seems to be a victim of the ongoing loudness wars, as it's mastered at such a high volume I had to turn my receiver way down to make it bearable. Lack of content as ever is a problem. We want new music to play, not the same old stuff from the 1960s/1970s. Current chart music, etc, needs to be available to drive the format forward. Also the few titles I have had to be ordered online as so far no HMV store I have visited

has even heard of the discs – let alone stocked them.

Adrian Naunton, via Facebook

Mark Craven replies: Thanks for your views Adrian and Paul. It seems that Blu-ray Pure Audio has at least captured the attention of home cinema fans and audiophiles.

You're both right to highlight the familiarity of many of the titles being released. If Universal

Pioneer's VSX-S510 – slim, and with dual subwoofer outputs

Music Group really wants to drive home the idea of hi-res audio, it needs to cater for contemporary tastes.

Subwoofer no-go?

This is more of a query than a letter! In a recent issue you reviewed the Pioneer VSX-S510 AV receiver. This would meet all my needs but can you just confirm something about the subwoofer output? Does it work?

The reason I ask is that living in Malta as I do there is such a lot of things you don't have access to, so you cannot go and see for yourself or ask the proper questions. In a letter on Amazon – which is where I would have to buy the Pioneer from – someone said there was no output from the subwoofer out, so his sub didn't work.

I have a Jamo 360 – a powered subwoofer – and I don't know whether this person's subwoofer was powered or not.

Peter McHale, via email

Steve May replies: The VSX-S510 has two subwoofer pre-outs, and I tested it using one of these and it worked fine. The person writing on Amazon either may have, as you suggest, a passive woofer, or a faulty amp. Perhaps most likely is that they have the Pioneer set up incorrectly ■

CONTACT US...

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Plush picture palace



HCC reader **Steve Clark** guides you through his 7.2-channel projector setup – and explains how he strived to create a 'real cinema experience', helped by some DIY and auction site browsing

Introduce yourself....

I'm Steve Clark, 58, from Milton Keynes. I've worked in the home improvement industry for the past 15 years. My background has been mainly selling anything from houses to kettles, managing and later owning an electrical business. I always enjoy a good challenge, especially when it comes down to sourcing out a bargain.

How did you catch the home cinema bug?

I guess I've always enjoyed technology, from the early days selling Philips LaserDisc

players. And Hitachi disc players working on stylus which were nearly all returned. They were rubbish!

Setting up my first home cinema came really by accident. I started with an Epson projector. I used this for business meetings a couple of times and then didn't touch it for a couple of years until I decided to see if it worked with my DVD player. And to my surprise it worked okay, playing on a basic pop-up screen. It wasn't long until I purchased

Steve relaxes with his favourite magazine...



Our AV-holic went through three different colour schemes before finding the look he wanted



an 'out of the box' Sony 5.1 home cinema package, and I was hooked.

Whereabouts in your house is the cinema room?

It resides in a spare bedroom and has taken just over two years to come together. I've changed the colour scheme three times as I wanted a room with some atmosphere, rather than simply looking like a room with just a projector and a screen.

The seating I wanted had to be original cinema chairs. These were incredibly cheap (only just over £400 for seven seats). When you're watching a movie it feels as if you're there in an actual cinema. Amazingly, the room even smells like one – you can't buy that slice of originality! Even details like my BBFC rating sign and the exit sign are original. Most of the items were purchased from auction websites very cheaply.

It's a very neat-looking room...

Thanks. I like to keep most of the cables hidden, using conduits colour-matched to the décor. It's much easier to upgrade any wiring or hardware on the surface than it is to channel everything through walls every time. Besides, you can't see much because the conduit is mostly up against the coving.

Over the last year I have made everything neater. I've tidied up areas like the AV cabinet placed at the back of the room, and tried to keep all the wiring down to a minimum, out of sight and not in view of the screen. Kit belongs at the rear – I think it's important

to have only the screen to look at rather than a row of LED lights...

The raised plinth for the rear seats I made myself, with the built-in lighting which was very simple to achieve – the lights are outdoor decking types. It incorporates a lot of the

'3D is now becoming my favourite way of viewing a movie, *Prometheus* has to be the best'

wiring for the rear speakers and the rear sub woofer. It's just a timber framework with plywood, and the carpet fitters did the rest.

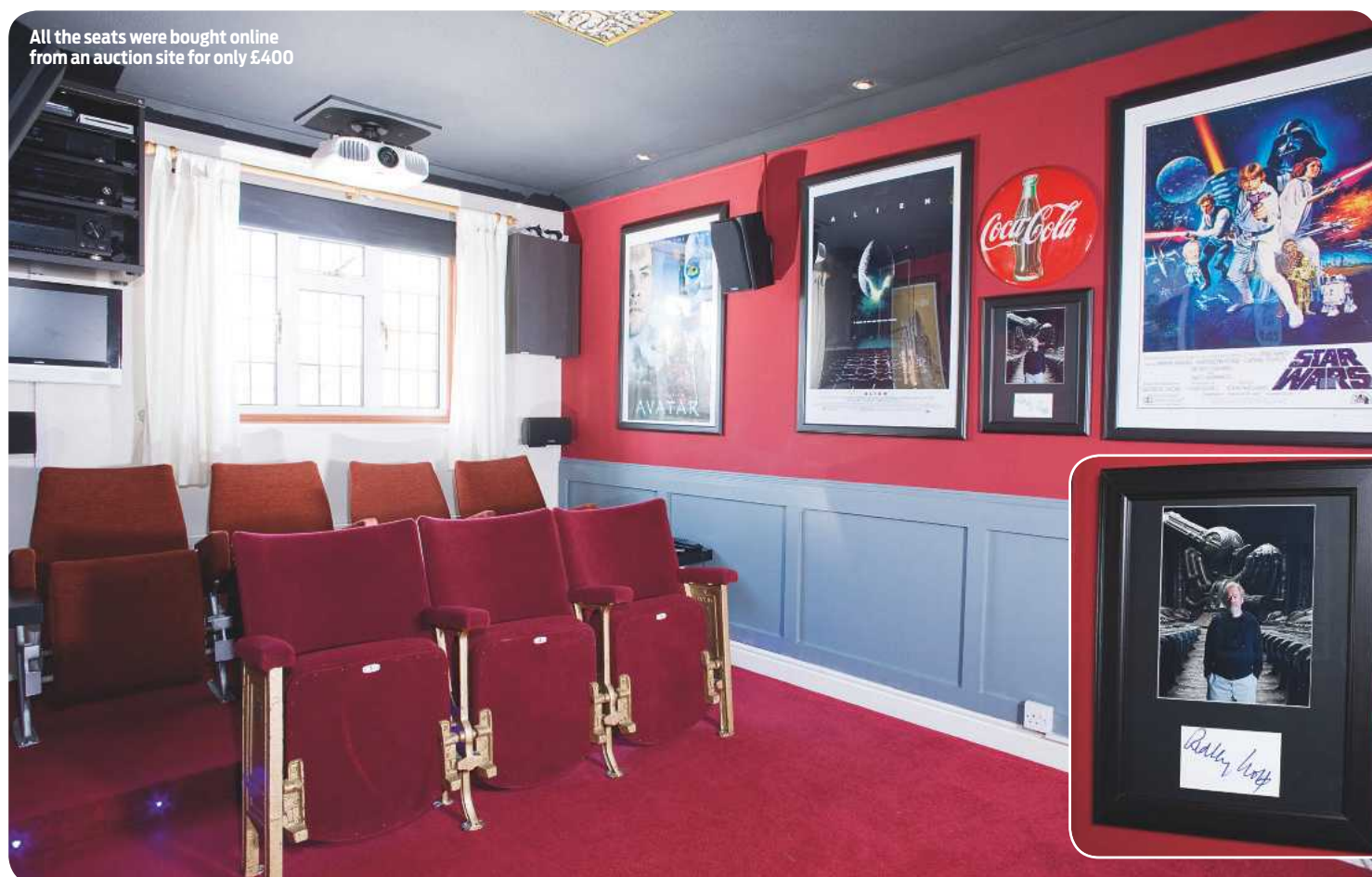
What hardware is in the system?

The projector is an Epson EH-TW5910, and I must say the contrast and bright 3D detailing are just fab. After reading up on and being shown others, for a lower to medium-priced projector I think this must be one of the best out there.

The speaker system is a 7.2 configuration, driven by a Pioneer VSX-923 AV receiver. Compared to my previous Onkyo amp this is a lot smoother in delivery to the two KEF PSW-2000 subwoofers. You just have to hear the film *War Horse* when those large guns go off. It's like thunder and gives the seats a nice shake. One is placed directly behind the rear seats and the other in front of the screen. ➤



The rear window features a black-out blind to control light levels during the day



All the seats were bought online from an auction site for only £400

And you've got two Blu-ray players.

Yes! My two Blu-ray players are both Pioneers. I have a BDP-LX71 which I use for my 2D Blu-rays and DVDs. I've had this for two years. It's just outstanding, and I have yet to find another machine that comes close to it for the price I paid (around £200). The colours and sound are superb.

The other player is one of Pioneer's BDP-LX55s, which I use for my 3D films. I must confess 3D is now becoming my favourite way of enjoying a movie, especially *Prometheus*, which has to be the best film made for 3D.

The two front speakers are KEF K series models – old now but they really still sound amazing. The four rear/surround speakers are from Mission's Series 7, and these deliver fantastic separation (I like the rain scene from *The Road to Perdition* for a demo). Probably my best toy is the Totem Dream Catcher centre speaker. This provides a fantastic spread of sound across the front of my handmade screen. This is a fixed design because it feels more authentic when coming into the room than one that's suspended. The screen size is 120in.

Roughly how much have you spent on the whole room?

The whole setup so far has cost around £3,000 thanks to those auction sites!



Steve's collection of film memorabilia includes this signed Ridley Scott photograph from the set of *Prometheus*

A Pioneer VSX-923 receiver replaced a previous Onkyo model, and joins the two Pioneer BD decks, Sky+HD and Nintendo Wii console

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What do your friends and family make of the room and your AV hobby?

They love the whole experience, particularly with 3D. Favourites have been *Frozen*, *Man of Steel* and *Avengers Assemble*. The latter has the best soundtrack on any Blu-ray.

After watching a film I'm always asked when the next showing is going to be. Some of my friends even want to hire the room out. Maybe I'll have to look into that...

How is the system controlled?

I have a Harmony One remote, which operates all the hardware from the one seat. The lighting is controlled by a Siemens remote programmed in three modes. This enables the lighting to be just right for entry and leaving, and low-lighting for the clock and exit sign.

Do you watch any movies/TV from download/streaming sites?

Streaming movies is not on my list just yet. I just prefer the hard copy, which I feel is far superior. However, I can see that streaming is the future – after all, ask the ex-employees of Blockbuster.

Are you excited by 4K/Ultra HD?

I can't wait to see the cost of 4K projectors come down in the next year or so, because I for one will be first in the queue after seeing an incredible demo recently. A large department store in Milton Keynes had a TV room especially set up for 4K, using a Samsung model. The depth and colour blending was just staggering. The store used a film of the Grand Canyon. Anybody wanting to sell anything in 4K has to try to get that demo disc as it was like hanging over a cliff. The only thing missing was the feel of the wind.

There's a screen below your kit rack – what's that for?

The rear TV is kept there for my wife to watch repeats on Sky while ironing and exercising on the Wii!

Lastly what's next on your equipment wish-list, and why?

My next project is just making the room feel even more original. Home cinema should be all about picture, sound and having a real experience. I would love an original Odeon clock or a 1950s Coca-Cola machine. If anybody knows where I can get those, please let me know! ■

BE IN HCC!

EMAIL US: If you want to share your home cinema setup with other readers, email a selection of hi-res pictures (including one of yourself if you want) to letters@homecinemachoice.com with the subject heading 'AV-Holic', and we'll be in touch.



Top-left: Steve rates the ceiling-mounted Epson EH-TW5910 projector as 'one of the best out there'

Top-right: A second KEF subwoofer is mounted behind the rear seats

Above right: Harmony and Siemens controllers handle AV and lighting

Above left: The Totem Acoustic Dream Catcher centre speaker is Steve's 'best toy'

Blu-ray discs are stored tidily in a wall-mounted cupboard

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*1 Typical lamp life achieved through testing. Will vary according to operational use and environmental conditions

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Kit list:

JVC DLA-X700R:	£7,000
Teufel System 10 7.2:	£12,000
Onkyo PR-SC5509/ PA-MC5501:	£5,000
Oppo BDP-105D:	£1,000

Total: £25,500



JVC's projector and Onkyo's pre/power duo get the THX thumbs up

1. Projector JVC DLA-X700R

Spending around seven grand on JVC's big-boned projector will ensure a standard of performance up there with some commercial cinemas.

Boasting THX 3D certification and extensive calibration tools, the DLA-X700R carries a mere native resolution of 1,920 x 1,080. However, using a trio of JVC's 6th-generation D-ILA chips and the company's eShift3 technology means that the output is effectively up-rezzed to 4K for HD sources – and it will take native 4K video, too, should you have any.

JVC is now on its third-generation optical engine, fine-tuning what was already a very well received image processing system on its previous D-ILA beasts. Contrast here is rated at 120,000:1 native (or 1,200,000:1 via JVC's dynamic Intelligent Lens Aperture tech) and performance is exemplary. The PJ crafts an effortlessly vivid and dynamic picture with silky-smooth motion and black levels that deliver near three-dimensional depth even on 2D material. It really is that good – and its X900R premium-grade sibling is even better, if you have an extra £3,000.

Also consider: Panasonic TX-P60ZT65

Panasonic's last-gasp THX-certified plasma may also only be a Full HD model, but its images are routinely mesmerizing.

2. Speakers Teufel System 10

German brand Teufel's top-of-the-line THX Ultra 2-specified System 10 comes in at around £7,000 in standard 5.1 trim. It can be expanded to 7.2 with the addition of a second pair of S 1000 speakers and a second S 10000 subwoofer. This brings the total cost to around £12,000, which for such a big, powerful and THX-friendly system is a bit of a bargain.

Most of this system is ridiculously user-friendly, too. The main LCR speakers, used for the front three channels and rear-backs in our setup, are only 24cm deep and can be stand- or wall-mounted. The system's surround speakers use a di-polar configuration to best fill the soundstage through the length of your room. The Teufel S 10000 subwoofers are a bit more of a challenge to install discreetly. Each packs in a pair of 15in bass drivers and a 750W

amp in an upright cabinet the size of a small wardrobe.

This system is extremely potent and not exactly subtle. Then again, the same can be said of most Hollywood movies – so it's a match made in heaven.

Also consider: KEF R Series 7.2

The R Series isn't THX-certified but sounds sublime, and you can assemble a seven-channel setup using dipole surrounds.





3. AV processor & power amp Onkyo PR-SC5509 & PA-MC5501

To best match the specification of our top-spec THX speaker package, a separate AV processor and power amp is the way to go. Separating all that delicate high-speed processing and line-level analogue circuitry from the more industrial process of generating massive electrical currents to drive your speakers offers real gains in performance, albeit at the expense of some wallet pain.

Onkyo's PR-SC5509 processor and PA-MC5501 combo are THX Ultra2 Plus-certified, packed with

features and come in at around £5,000 for the pair. Okay, you will need to budget for the extra shelf space and seven interconnect cables to link them together, but this duo's flexibility and performance is outstanding. The processor provides 4K upscaling, eight HDMI inputs, networking and internet radio, while the PA-MC5501 gives you nine channels of over 150W. Mwa ha haaa.

Also consider: Yamaha CX-A5000/MX-A5000

Miss out on the THX approval but gain an extra two channels of power. 11.2? This duo will do it.

4. Screen Screen Research ClearPix2

This acoustically-transparent screen material from Screen Research is THX- and ISF-certified for stunning visual results and available in custom-built sizes, shapes and styles. So if you want widescreen or CinemaScope, tab-tensioned, fixed or motorized, then Screen Research can build you a screen fit for the purpose. Whichever you choose, the Teufel main front speakers make for a great partnership as they can be mounted on the wall behind the screen. Pricing naturally varies – it depends on the screen option you go for – so it's not included on our shopping list. Budget for a few grand at the very least...

Also consider: Painting your wall...

If your budget is blown on the AV hardware, you could fire the JVC's image straight at your wall as a temporary fix. Try a dedicated paint, such as those offered by Goo Systems.

Screen Research's ClearPix2 fabric is acoustically-transparent and 'moire-free'

AND ADD THESE...

Grab these accessories for an effective system boost

QED Performance subwoofer cable, 10m



QED's premium construction Performance interconnect is now available in lengths up to 10m (£95), ideal for sub/processor hookups in large rooms.

Professional calibration

Get the DLA-X700R running at its very best in your room courtesy of a dedicated AV calibration. Expect to pay from £250 for the pleasure.

Pure Theatre large projector lift

Instead of a ceiling mount, glam up the system with a motorised drop-down lift. Pure Theatre's large model will handle the X700R and retails for £1,250.



5. BD player Oppo BDP-105D

We're veering off the THX path at this point because our chosen BD player doesn't need a badge to prove its mettle. The Oppo BDP-105D builds on the stunning original 105EU model by adding Darbee Visual Presence to the mix – advanced video processing tech that increases the depth and punch of an image by modifying pixel luminance depending on content. User controls range from 'subtle' to 'in-yer-face' – you'll have fun experimenting.

Aside the from Darbee processing, the BDP-105D offers a treasure trove of features including 4K upscaling, native DSD audio processing, HDMI inputs, an asynchronous USB input and the implementation of superb ESS Sabre DACs. In short, the BDP-105D is one of the finest universal players available.

Also consider: Onkyo BD-SP809

A little old in the tooth, but fully THX-certified and a great cosmetic match for the other Onkyo AV components in our system.

NEXT ISSUE...

DISCREET BEDROOM SETUP:

Want to enjoy HD and potent audio in the comfort of your bedroom? We assemble a sleek system that won't upset the décor

FILM FRANCHISE

Planet of the Apes

The series that turned a spot of monkey business into serious sci-fi



'If you think that's a whopper, you should have seen the one that got away...'



Ape actor: Andy Serkis clearly enjoys playing CGI simians. Prior to providing the mo-cap performances for Caesar in *Rise...* and *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, he did the same for the title character in 2005's *King Kong*.



WHILE SOME MAY look at science-fiction as little more than an outlet for speculative escapism, the genre's history is also steeped in political and social allegory. Pierre Boulle's 1963 novel *La Planète des singes* is a case in point – its tale of three astronauts who land on a planet dominated by intelligent apes is used by the author to turn a critical eye on human society in general.

Having already earned worldwide fame with his 1952 novel *Le Pont de la rivière Kwaï* (*The Bridge over the River Kwai*) and David Lean's 1957 film adaptation, Boulle's sci-fi novel was quickly translated into English and found success on both sides of the Atlantic

(as *Planet of the Apes* in the US and *Monkey Planet* in the UK). Then 20th Century Fox announced that it would be bringing *Planet of the Apes* to cinemas in early 1968.

Hollywood goes bananas!

While the film dispensed with the apes' advanced civilisation, it maintained the book's rich vein of allegory and satire. And, aided by its macho action and awe-inspiring makeup effects, *Planet of the Apes* was a smash hit with audiences around the world. So great was its success that over the next seven years the movie was followed by no less than four cinematic sequels, a live-action TV show and



Conquest cut: A pre-credit scene showing police encountering an abused ape was cut from *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* due to its violent content – but it did appear in Marvel's 1976 comic book adaptation.

a Saturday morning cartoon series. And while the TV outings were fairly formulaic affairs, the feature films persisted in alluding to contemporary subjects, such as race and the Vietnam War.

Despite these more 'adult' themes, the movies continued to draw cinemagoers to the multiplex, and they inspired a plethora of merchandising that would only really be overtaken by George Lucas' *Star Wars* saga.

While the popularity of the original *Planet of the Apes* series diminished with each new instalment, Hollywood producers – and sci-fi fans – have remained fascinated by the premise. So much so that when Tim Burton failed to recapture the magic of the 1968 original with his spectacular yet empty 2001 're-imagining', another ...*Apes* movie surfaced a mere 10 years later. And Rupert Wyatt's 2011 reboot showed that it was still possible to make smart, intelligent sci-fi amongst all of the monkey mayhem. A trend we hope will continue with this Summer's eagerly-awaited sequel.



Tim Burton's 2001 effort was more of a dog than an ape

PICK OF THE BEST...

1 Planet of the Apes (1968)

Not only is it packed with unforgettable imagery, endlessly quotable dialogue and breathtaking action, this sci-fi classic is also a terrific reminder of the bygone days when Hollywood studios weren't afraid to let their blockbusters challenge audiences with provocative and intelligent ideas.

2 Rise of the Planet of the Apes

In the wake of Tim Burton's terrible 're-imagining' (see below) nobody expected much from yet another franchise reboot. But director Rupert Wyatt impresses with one of the smartest popcorn flicks of recent times, wrapping the epic spectacle around an emotional core.

3 Conquest of the Planet of the Apes

This surprisingly bleak and brutal fourth film in the series turns back time to the start of the ape rebellion over humanity. The result is both entertaining and politically-charged, drawing visual inspiration from the notorious 1965 Watts race riots.

AND THE WORST...

Planet of the Apes (2001)

From Mark Wahlberg's wooden performance as the lead to the unintentionally hilarious 'Monkey Jesus' and the utterly nonsensical twist ending, Tim Burton's sci-fi blockbuster is, let's face it, an abject disaster. The only person to walk away unscathed is special effects legend Rick Baker, whose ape makeup effects are never less than astonishing.

COLLECTIBLES

No self-respecting ...*Apes* fan can afford to miss out on these goodies

Les Planète des singes



Published in 1963, the first edition of Pierre Boulle's French sci-fi novel may be a little pricey at around £850, but you can also use it to help learn a second language!

Planet of the Apes Metal Lunch Box and Thermos



Released to tie-in with the 1974 TV series, this vintage metal lunch box and thermos by Aladdin is highly sought after by collectors, with pristine versions changing hands for around \$550.

Mego Action Figures



Mego released 10 8in *Planet of the Apes* action figures between 1974 and 1975. Prices can run as high as \$390 for a mint-on-card version of the helmet-wearing Urko gorilla figure.

The Great Lawgiver Statue



Standing around nine-feet tall, Yahoo! Make-up & Monster Studios' official life-size replica of the Great Lawgiver statue was made-to-order from moulds taken from one of the two original statues used in the films.

THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION...

Get your hands on those damned dirty apes on both DVD and Blu-ray...

- The Planet of the Apes Collection boxset** (R2 DVD)
- Planet of the Apes: 2-Disc Special Edition** [2001] (R2 DVD)
- Planet of the Apes: The Complete TV Series** (R2 DVD)
- Planet of the Apes: Special Edition** [1968] (R2 DVD)
- Planet of the Apes: Book & DVD** [1968] (R2 DVD)
- Planet of the Apes: Ultimate Collector's Edition Ape-Head boxset** (R2 DVD)
- Return to the Planet of the Apes: The Complete Animated Series** (R1 DVD – US Import)



- Planet of the Apes: Definitive Edition** [2001] (R2 DVD)
- Planet of the Apes** [2001] (Region B BD)

- Planet of the Apes: 40-Year Evolution boxset** (Region A BD – US Import)
- Planet of the Apes: 40-Year Evolution boxset** (Region B BD)
- Rise of the Planet of the Apes** (All-region BD)
- Planet of the Apes: Evolution Collection – All 7 Movies boxset** (All-region BD)
- Rise of the Planet of the Apes [Play.com-exclusive steelbook]** (All-region BD)
- Planet of the Apes [Zavvi-exclusive steelbook]** [1968] (All-region BD)

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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **NON-STOP** Enjoy high-altitude thrills with Liam Neeson
THE WOLF OF WALL STREET Scorsese's black comedy dazzles on BD **JACK RYAN: SHADOW RECRUIT**
 Big-budget reboot sets out to resuscitate action thriller franchise **HER** Science-fiction with a huge heart
ANCHORMAN 2 Will Ferrell gets the gang back together for this comedy sequel **AND MUCH MORE!**

Way out East

47 Ronin 3D → Universal Pictures → All-region BD

Historical fact meets Hollywood fantasy in *47 Ronin*. Find out if we've fallen under the film's stereoscopic spell when we check out the 3D Blu-ray on p102.



HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★★☆☆
Dire	★★★☆☆

'Put your hand up if you think I should make *Taken 3*'



Liam Neeson's flight club

Despite a few plot-holes, this airplane-bound thriller is definitely worth booking a seat for

→ **Non-Stop**

Liam Neeson further cements his place as Hollywood's go-to guy for slightly over-the-top action thrillers with this taut, fast-paced, high-altitude adventure.

Neeson stars as US air marshal Bill Marks, who begins receiving messages on his phone during a night flight from New York to London from someone threatening to kill a passenger every 20 minutes unless their bank account is wired \$150m. When the first body duly surfaces bang on time, and the bank account requested turns out to be in Marks' name, it's clear that it isn't a hoax. But who can he trust? And can he convince the passengers and those down on the ground that he isn't hijacking the plane himself?

From the moment Marks receives the first mystery text all the way to *Non-Stop*'s fraught, explosive finale, the script team and director Jaume Collet-Serra earn their crust by keeping the tension cranked high and the audience guessing. This is, in essence, a whodunnit, with more red herrings than a communist's fish tank, all held together by Neeson's effortless performance and a great supporting cast including Julianne Moore and Michelle Dockery. The script goes a bit hammy at times, and you'll need to seriously suspend your disbelief, but it'll be worth it.

Picture: StudioCanal's 2.35:1 1080p encode works well with the somewhat limited nature of *Non-Stop*'s cinematography. This is a film with next-to-no exterior sequences or natural lighting; the plane's



Neeson and director Jaume Collet-Serra previously collaborated on *Unknown*



HCC VERDICT

Non-Stop
→ StudioCanal → Region B BD
→ £25 Approx
WE SAY: A gripping, tense and enjoyably daft thriller on a solid HD disc

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

interior is a mixture of cool greys and blues and blinking overhead lights. The imagery therefore doesn't really pop, but the tonal balance is spot on and skin tones appear natural. Close-up shots exhibit plenty of detail and texture; at the same time, some shots are deliberately soft. A small niggle is that during darker scenes some areas of the image can be mired in black crush. However, this transfer retains a fine grain structure without falling foul of digital noise.

Audio: This DTS-HD 5.1 track is more immersive than you might expect. Dialogue is prominent in the mix, be it frightened whispers or shouted commands, and it's matched by creative use of the surround channels to place you firmly in the middle of the aircraft's heightened environment. As Collet-Serra's camera swoops and twists around the aisles, the soundfield follows.

Details like Marks' beeping phone or a gun's safety being deactivated are clean and distinct, and the sound engineers know when to use the LFE channel to add portentous throbs or potent bass slam. Those after the most raucous demo material should head straight to the climactic final chapter...

Extras: Perusing the disc's bonus material is more of a short-haul experience than a trans-Atlantic flight. There are two featurettes – *Non-Stop Action* and *Suspense at 40,000 Feet* – which offer little more than talking-head pleasantries rather than a detailed look at the film-making process. In addition, there's 11 minutes of interviews with Neeson, Moore, Dockery, Collet-Serra and producer Joel Silver, and the trailer.

Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones

Paramount → All-region BD
£25 Approx



With its tale of two young friends, one of whom becomes possessed by demonic forces, the latest

instalment in the 'found footage' franchise feels like a horror version of superhero flick *Chronicle*. This new approach injects some much needed pep back into the series and goes some way towards finally revealing what the films have been building up to. Given the nature of the material, it's hardly surprising that the Blu-ray's AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode and DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix aren't that exciting. Extras include deleted scenes and two cuts of the movie.



I, Frankenstein

Entertainment in Video → Region B BD
£25 Approx



This supernatural action flick is essentially a rehash of writer Kevin Greivoux's earlier hit *Underworld*, albeit with

Aaron Eckhart replacing Kate Beckinsale as the conflicted creature at the heart of a war between two rival factions of mythical creatures. While poor box office takings should ensure that this dismal effort is unlikely to spawn a franchise like that of its predecessor, *I, Frankenstein* still cuts an impressive figure on 3D Blu-ray thanks to the depth and clarity of the stereoscopic 2.40:1 imagery, as well as a thrill-packed DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack. Extras include a pair of commentaries.



Willow Creek

Kaleidoscope → R2 DVD
£13 Approx



Police Academy alumni and bigfoot fan 'Bobcat' Goldthwait writes and directs this handycam

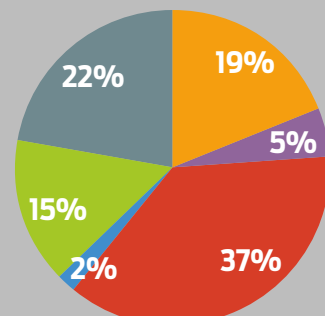
horror about a couple searching for the mythical monster. While *Willow Creek's* setup and structure naturally brings *The Blair Witch Project* to mind, Goldthwait's flick benefits from a sense of humour and likeable leads who actually behave like real people. This DVD release delivers a fine anamorphic 1.78:1 transfer that copes well with the lo-fi imagery and an effective Dolby Digital 5.1 mix that is by turns creepy and aggressive. Pick of the meagre extras is footage from the film's West Coast premiere.



WE ASKED...

We want to know your favourite Michael Bay blockbusters...

Bad Boys 1-2 19% Pearl Harbor 5%
Armageddon 37% The Island 2%
Transformers 1-3 15% The Rock 22%



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action



Rebooted thriller is lacking in thrills

Chris Pine finds it impossible to escape from the shadow of his three predecessors

→ JACK RYAN: SHADOW RECRUIT

Presumably forgetting that it had already rebooted the Jack Ryan franchise for a new generation with 2002's excellent *The Sum of All Fears*, Paramount has gone and pulled the same trick again. Sadly, in the process it has transformed the character into yet another generic pretty-boy action hero.

The writing is on the wall right from the off thanks to a trite opening scene that sees Ryan (Chris Pine) abandon his studies at the London School of Economics in the wake of 9/11 in order to join the marines. This in turn is quickly curtailed by a helicopter crash that eventually leads to him being recruited as an analyst for the CIA. And before you know it he's being shot at in Moscow and racing around New York on a motorbike.

The script's failings are only compounded by the cast. Pine brings nothing new to the character of Ryan outside of his squint-a-bit-and-maybe-it-could-be-Jason-Bourne looks, Keira Knightly is suitably awful in a thankless love interest role, while Kenneth Branagh (who also directs) chews the scenery as the thin-lipped Russian baddy. Only Kevin Costner really escapes unscathed as Ryan's gruff CIA boss, despite his only function being to tell us how smart Ryan is over and over again.

Ultimately there's just nothing about *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit* that feels in any way original. Every action scene, character and story beat is borrowed from another film – more often than not a better one. Which means that it looks like Ryan will need another reboot to keep this franchise viable.



Next up is a *Street Hawk* reboot

Picture: *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit's* AVC 2.40:1 1080p transfer packs as much of a punch as any action hero. Colours are strong, contrast is stable and close-ups demonstrate perfectly-rendered textures. Yes, the shaky-cam approach adopted for the action scenes rob the image of a little sharpness, but overall it's a gorgeous Blu-ray encode.

Audio: Just as impressive is the disc's DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix. The excellent clarity ensures that not a single line of dialogue is lost in the expansive soundfield, while the superb dynamic range and powerful bass add panache to the action scenes.

Extras: In addition to a fairly technical chat-track featuring the director and producers, the disc also contains six deleted/alternate scenes (with optional commentary) and four *Making of...* featurettes exploring the process of rebooting the character, Branagh's performance, the action scenes and thinking behind using Russians as the film's villains.



HCC VERDICT

Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit

→ Paramount → All-region BD

→ £25 Approx

WE SAY: Solid AV credentials mean that this unoriginal spy thriller could still find some fans on Blu-ray

Movie ★★☆☆☆

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★☆☆☆

DISC
OF THE
MONTH



Money can buy you happiness

Scorsese's account of the rise and fall of a stockbroker is a masterpiece of cinematic excess



Scorsese's initial cut of the film was reported to be around four hours long

→ THE WOLF OF WALL STREET

Martin Scorsese is no stranger to making films about criminals. Yet in the past he's mainly concerned himself with gangsters, through gritty efforts such as *Mean Streets*, *Goodfellas*, *Casino* and *The Departed*. His latest film tackles a completely different type of law-breaker and does so in a way so tonally removed from pretty much anything he's ever done before that it feels like the septuagenarian filmmaker has found a whole new lease of life.

Based on the memoirs of a former New York stockbroker who was jailed for stock market manipulation, *The Wolf of Wall Street* is a biting satire that (like some sort of head-on crash involving *Animal House* and *Wall Street*) plays every bit as loud and exuberant as the outrageous characters it follows.

Chief among them, of course, is the 'Wolf' himself, Jordan Belfort. And in his fifth collaboration with Scorsese, Leonardo DiCaprio more than lives up to his reputation as one of the greatest actors of his generation, delivering a *tour-de-force* performance as his

character submerges himself into every depravity imaginable (and quite a few more besides).

As much as the movie belongs to DiCaprio, he's backed up by a flawless supporting cast with Jonah Hill proving his chops as Jordan's best-friend-cum-partner-in-crime Donnie Azoff.

What it lacks in terms of sheer drama compared to Scorsese's previous crime epics, *The Wolf of Wall Street* more than makes up for with humour. This is a comedy of the darkest, blackest kind, but will leave you laughing louder than any Adam Sandler or Will Ferrell flick has managed in a very long time. It's going to be tough to top the sight of Jordan's drugged-up effort at getting into his car – and the subsequent fight with Donnie – when it comes to the year's funniest moments in cinema.

So, while it may not be subtle and threatens to stretch your patience with a three-hour running time, it's impossible not to get swept up in Scorsese's exhilarating examination of greed and excess.

Picture: Despite its disc-bursting length, *The Wolf of Wall Street* brings plenty of dazzle with its AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode.

Colours run frequently towards the warmer end of the spectrum, although this has more to do with the characters' bright clothes and deep tans than any additional post-production tinkering – as demonstrated by the purity of any whites that appear on screen (particularly Donnie's teeth).

Fine detailing also impresses throughout, revealing plenty of subtle facial blemishes in close-ups of the cast. Going hand-in-hand

Margot Robbie holds her own with the boys playing Jordan's frequent sparring partner (and second wife) Naomi

DEMO SCREEN...

The Wolf of Wall Street

Time code: 145.26 – 147.44



Ship of fools: Jordan's impromptu trip to Monaco through 'choppy waters' turns into something more exciting as his yacht hits a storm in a sequence that's sure to thrill your 5.1 speaker array.



Popping pills: Donnie's waterlogged search below decks for a bag of 'ludes should challenge your screen with its jerky camera and varying brightness levels caused by flashes of lightning.



The big dipper: The DTS 5.1 track makes the most of the destruction caused by the storm as Jordan's helicopter is washed overboard. And that's before the yacht goes head-to-head with a rogue wave!



Musical rescue: As chaos subsides, and Jordan's narration starts up again, the soundtrack demonstrates its musical chops once more with a rendition of Umberto Tozzi's pop hit *Gloria*.

with this are the sharpness inherent in the cinematography and the perfectly rendered black levels.

With banding, noise and artefacting all notably absent, it's impossible to view Universal Pictures' hi-def treatment of *Wolf...* as anything less than a resounding triumph..

Audio: Even if it doesn't deliver the pounding dynamics that some people would consider to be the essential components of a killer lossless mix, *The Wolf of Wall Street's* DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 soundtrack is a high-quality affair. Indeed, the intricately worked sound design brings together layer after layer of audio elements, from dialogue to atmospheric effects, and seemingly does so with incredible ease and skill.

Every location brings its own distinctive soundscape, from the confined, slightly muffled interior of a limousine to the almost never-ending expanse of the Stratton Oakmount office, full of ringing telephones and shouting stockbrokers. The track's immaculate placement and positioning is key to the effectiveness of conjuring up these spaces, as well as ensuring that dialogue sounds crystal-clear whilst still feeling like a natural part of the soundfield.

As we've come to expect from a Scorsese film, *The Wolf of Wall Street's* soundtrack is packed to the brim with music, running the gamut from Bo Diddley's *Road Runner* to Sir Mix-A-Lot's *Baby Got Back*. Each track soars from the speakers with verve.



Extras: Universal's Blu-ray serves up a trio of featurettes to support the movie. It's not the most extravagant collection of bonus goodies you'll ever see (and certainly less than this cracking flick deserves), but is certainly an improvement on Paramount's US platter, which could only manage one of them.

The Wolf Pack (17 minutes) is a pretty standard *Making of...*, albeit with particular focus given to how much freedom Scorsese gave the actors (and himself) to improvise during the lengthy shoot. Any initial fears that *Running Wild* (11 minutes) is simply going to rehash the same ground are quickly put to rest as the focus shifts onto the excessive behaviour of the real-life characters and how it was recreated on screen. Finally, *The Wolf of Wall Street Round Table* (11 minutes) gets Scorsese, DiCaprio, Hill and writer Terence Winter together to chat about the process of making the film.



It was DiCaprio who first brought Jordan Belfort's book to Scorsese's attention



Every day DiCaprio prays a little bit harder for his first Oscar



HCC VERDICT

The Wolf of Wall Street

→ Universal Pictures

→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: Stunning picture and sound will leave you greedy for more where Scorsese's latest hit is concerned

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

ARCADE ACTION

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your home cinema system...

The Amazing Spider-Man 2

Activision → Xbox 360/Xbox One/PS3/PS4/PC → £45 Approx



If there's one thing that sets this latest Spider-Man spin-off above all the others that followed in the wake of 2004's superb *Spider-Man 2*, it's the way in which it gets the web-swinging mechanism spot-on. Mapping the web shooters to their corresponding shoulder buttons makes swinging through the streets of the game's virtual Big Apple an absolute joy. Sadly, the rest of the experience falls a little short.

Overlapping with the events of the recent film (albeit with a huge Gwen Stacy-sized hole), the game predominantly focuses on Spidey getting caught up in a gang war involving a host of familiar faces from the comics, including Kingpin, Black Cat, Kraven and even Carnage. Between levels you're left to tackle side-missions spread around the open world map in an effort to keep the forces of law and order off your back. All of which is moderately entertaining – if rather repetitive where the side-missions are concerned (rescue citizens from yet another burning building? Hmm...).

And there are a number of problems holding it back. Combat tries to ape that of *Arkham Asylum* only to fall way short. And many of the character models are surprisingly ugly, even on the next-gen Xbox One. All of which makes this latest Spider-Man videogame rather more 'Adequate' than 'Amazing.'



LEGO The Hobbit

Warner Bros. Entertainment → Xbox 360/Xbox One/PS3/PS4/PC → £45 Approx



TT Games has been knocking out this type of licensed LEGO game for almost a decade now, so you'd have every right to think that it would have perfected the formula. Indeed, many would argue that it did just that with last year's supremely enjoyable *LEGO Marvel Super Heroes*. However, the recent speed-up in the arrival



of new releases has also seen a decrease in quality – first with the incredibly glitchy *The LEGO Movie Videogame* and now with the unnecessarily fussy *LEGO The Hobbit*.

As with the earlier *LEGO The Lord of the Rings*, this latest outing mixes the usual

exploration, combat and construction with the need to manufacture items from specific types of 'loot'. While the manufacturing process itself has been streamlined this time around, the game's large environments mean that you are left heading off on lengthy (and dull) side-quests to get the materials you need. An attempt has been made to spice up the puzzles by giving the various dwarves different skills, but again this is hamstrung somewhat by the sheer number of characters in the party and how frustrating it gets trying to remember who can be used as a trampoline and who can mine precious gems. Still, at least in this way, the game does succeed in capturing the sense of ennui intermittent in the pair of films that inspired it.



Two Moon Junction

88 Films → Region B BD
£17 Approx



This slick slice of late '80s erotica tells the story of an attractive Southern heiress (Sherilyn Fenn) beginning a tempestuous affair with a muscle-bound rogue (Richard Tyson) in the run-up to her wedding. Typical of director Zalman King, it's a stylish affair with a strong cast and high production values to keep you interested between the naughty bits. This disc's 1.85:1-framed 1080p image is authentically gauzy, while the LPCM 2.0 mix copes admirably with the wailing saxophones.



Lost Girl: The Complete Fourth Season

Sony Pictures → R2 DVD
£30 Approx



The latest DVD outing for this sapphic supernatural series may not see *Lost Girl* at its absolute best, but there's still more heart, humour and fun here than you get in the majority of

its contemporaries. Unfortunately, not only does Sony Pictures stubbornly cling to its refusal to release the show on Blu-ray in the UK, but its DVD sets remain pared down to the bone. This means that once again fans have to make do with attractive anamorphic 1.78:1 transfers partnered by frustratingly limited DD 2.0 soundtracks, not to mention a complete lack of extras.



The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears

Metrodome → R2 DVD
£16 Approx



As with 2009's *Amer*, Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani's latest film is yet another run through the greatest hits of the Italian giallo. Incredibly, *The Strange Colour...* is even more of

a sensory overload than its predecessor and even less coherent, ensuring that watchers will have no worries about returning again and again to unpick its mysteries. While the lack of an HD release is a shame for such a beautiful film, this DVD still offers an attractive anamorphic 2.40:1 transfer and booming 5.1 mix.





In the near future
all offices will be
furnished by IKEA

Scarlett goes from 'It girl' to IT girl

Spike Jonze's sci-fi rom-com sees one man take his love of digital technology a little too far

→ HER

Following 2009's misfire *Where the Wild Things Are*, Spike Jonze's fourth film as director recalls his earlier work with screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (1999's *Being John Malkovich* and 2002's *Adaptation*) in its sophistication and smarts. Only here Jonze adds an extra layer of old-fashioned romance and sentiment that helps balance the more intellectual side of the movie.

Set in a near-future version of California, *Her* stars Joaquin Phoenix as the lonely and introverted Theodore Trombley, who ironically makes his living writing affectionate letters by proxy for people unwilling or unable to do it for themselves. Still coming to terms with his wife (Rooney Mara) leaving him, Theodore's life is transformed when he buys a new operating system for his computer and phone that is based around an artificial intelligence. Naming 'herself' Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson), the female OS opens Theodore's eyes to the wonders of the world and their friendship starts changing into a full-blown romance.

Now, unless you're one of those hardcore Apple devotees who queues for endless hours just to get the latest iPhone on the day of release, a story about a man basically falling in love with his smartphone sounds like the most ridiculous thing ever. And yet nothing about the relationship depicted in *Her* feels even remotely daft or artificial.

In addition to Jonze's heartfelt script (which certainly doesn't pull any punches when it comes



to realising the pain that often accompanies romance), a significant portion of the plaudits for the film's success must go to the cast. Despite being nothing more than a breathy voice, Samantha quickly becomes a palpable presence thanks to Johansson's utterly charming performance. And it's hard to think of anyone else who can go from world-weary melancholy to an almost child-like sense of wonder quite so perfectly as Phoenix does here.

Overall, this relationship between a man and his OS feels more authentic and believable than many of those between ordinary people depicted in Hollywood's more traditional rom-coms. Intriguing, rewarding stuff.

Picture: Shot primarily in muted tones, *Her*'s 1080p encode (framed at 1.85:1) might not scream out for attention, but nor does it take long to impress with its overall quality. Detailing is meticulous and beautifully refined, aided by the transfer's superior clarity and sharpness. Best of all, despite the kind of subdued palette that has tripped up plenty of other hi-def transfers in the past, the disc displays no noticeable technical issues whatsoever.

Audio: *Her*'s DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack provides a fairly low-key aural experience that nevertheless impresses with its tonality, precision and transparent stereo spread.

Extras: Just a 24-minute fly-on-the-wall *Making of...* doc, a 15-minute featurette discussing love in the modern world and a brief montage of behind-the-scenes footage. Disappointing.



Samantha Morton originally voiced the OS before Johansson was hired to redo it



HCC VERDICT

Her

→ Entertainment in Video

→ Region B BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: A great-looking presentation of this superb modern take on the rom-com. Shame about the extras

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★☆☆☆

Overall ★★★★★

Bill and Ted's journey to feudal Japan was less fun than they first imagined



Eastern promise is unfulfilled

Japanese fact becomes Hollywood fiction in this surprisingly solemn fantasy blockbuster



HCC VERDICT

47 Ronin 3D

→ Universal Pictures

→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: Poor extras and uninspired 3D do little to make this dull fantasy any more appealing on Blu-ray

Movie ★★☆☆☆

Picture ★★☆☆☆

Audio ★★☆☆☆

Extras ★★☆☆☆

Overall ★★☆☆☆

→ 47 RONIN 3D

The 300-year-old tale of the 47 Ronin who sought to avenge the death of their master is one of the most popular historical stories in Japanese culture, retold over and over again in countless plays, TV dramas and movies. So naturally, it was about time that Hollywood got in on the act...

Presumably deciding that a true account of the historical events was simply too ordinary for modern audiences, this US version sets the action in a fantastical version of Japan populated by monsters and witches. It also throws in Keanu Reeves as a half-breed hero with a mysterious past and supernatural powers of his own. All of which makes you wonder why the finished film is so dull and dour.

Picture: The 2D and 3D presentations of *47 Ronin* each get their own BD platter in this release. The former is an absolute stunner, mixing vividly rendered colours with impenetrable blacks to impressive effect. Meanwhile, the intricate texturing of the image leads to high expectations for what the native 3D version will deliver on your screen.

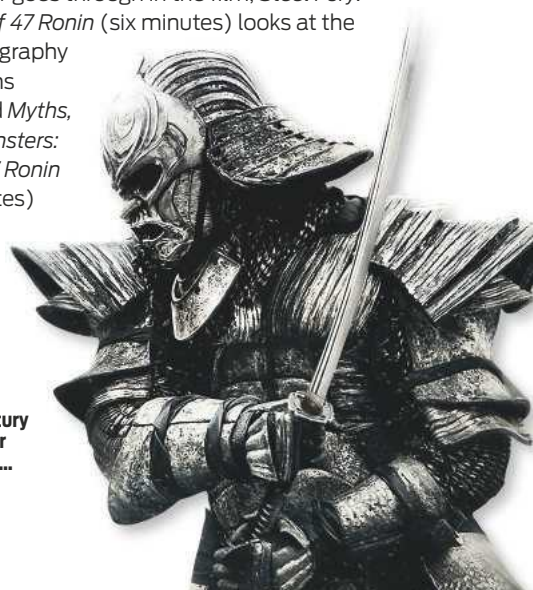
Indeed, early on it looks like the MVC 2.40:1 1080p stereoscopic encode is going to be an absolute winner thanks to some good depth of field and clear separation. However, as the film progressively gets darker and darker, the 3D imagery loses a lot of its impact, looking flatter and flatter – until, by the final showdown with the dragon (Chapter 17) you might as well be watching the 2D version for all the difference it would make.

Audio: The film's lossless DTS-HD MA 5.1 track delivers everything you'd expect from a big Hollywood action title.

The dynamic range, detail and clarity inherent in the mix is superb, infusing sequences such as the attack of the Tengu Lords in Chapter 12 with a real sense of space and movement that matches the characters as they whirl around in front of you. Backing this up is some particularly audacious bass output, which adds weight and power to the fight scenes. Worth playing loud.

Extras: An okay selection. *Re-Forging the Legend* (seven minutes) presents a rapid-fire look at the film's conception and production; *Keanu & Kai* (four minutes) covers the leading man and the arc his character goes through in the film; *Steel Fury: The Fights of 47 Ronin* (six minutes) looks at the fight choreography and weapons training; and *Myths, Magic & Monsters: The FX of 47 Ronin* (eight minutes) focuses on the special effects. There are four deleted scenes, too.

Meet 18th century Japan's answer to Darth Vader...



The Pit and the Pendulum

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£23 Approx



If the hi-def debut of Roger Corman's classic 1961 adaptation of Poe's short story doesn't quite dazzle in the same way as Arrow's BD transfer for the earlier *The Fall of the House of Usher*, there's still a lot to savour about this platter. While the restored AVC 2.35:1 1080p image still exhibits plenty of small scratches and marks, it's much better than any previous release. Meanwhile, the cornucopia of extras includes a pair of chat tracks, a 45-min retrospective *Making of...* doc, and a 1970 TV show with Vincent Price narrating four Poe stories.



Thunderbolt and Lightfoot

Second Sight → Region B BD
£20 Approx

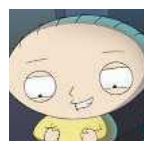


Clint Eastwood and Jeff Bridges star as retired thief Thunderbolt and good-natured drifter Lightfoot in Michael Cimino's amiable 1974 crime caper. While the rather modest story is stretched by the two-hour running time, the deftly drawn characters make it all worthwhile. Sadly, Second Sight was unable to licence the extras used on Twilight Time's limited edition US Blu-ray, so this UK release is a barebones affair. However, the good news is that the film looks and sounds first-rate courtesy of the restored 2.35:1-framed visuals and LPCM dual-mono soundtrack.



Family Guy: Season 13

20th Century Fox → R2 DVD
£28 Approx



After so many seasons it's hardly surprising that Seth MacFarlane's animated sitcom feels a bit past its best. But this latest collection of 22 episodes shows that even after all this time *Family Guy* is capable of delivering some big laughs – particularly when it comes to the show's inspired 200th episode *Yug Ylimaf*. In AV terms this set sticks closely to those since the ...*Season 10* DVD, which marked the jump into (anamorphic 1.78:1) widescreen. Likewise, the Dolby Digital 5.1 audio does exactly what you'd expect from a TV 'toon. Extras include a 200th episode featurette plus all of the usual goodies.



The Armstrong Lie

Sony Pictures → Region B BD
£20 Approx



Shelved when a doping scandal erupted in 2012 and started up again after Lance Armstrong's *Oprah* confession, this documentary sadly fails to break through the barriers surrounding the disgraced cyclist. It certainly doesn't paint an attractive portrait of this ruthlessly determined, cheating sportsman, but also refuses to really go in for the kill, veering away from asking difficult questions during interviews with the man himself. Still, it is a watchable film and this hi-def release complements it with a solid AV package and interesting extras, including a director's commentary and Q&A.



Extras! Extras! Read all about 'em!

Breaking news: Middling comedy sequel hits Blu-ray loaded with bonus goodies...

→ ANCHORMAN 2: THE LEGEND CONTINUES

This belated sequel to Will Ferrell's 2004 comedy smash *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* moves the action from the mid-'70s to the early '80s as Ron (Will Ferrell) is hired to be one of the anchors on the world's first 24-hour news station. Stuck in the graveyard shift, Ron's team decides to focus on trivial but attention-grabbing newscasts and celebrity gossip, which makes them a ratings smash and changes the landscape of news reporting.

This is all very funny. However, the trouble with *Anchorman 2* is that the above only takes up half of the film's bloated running time. The other hour sees it go careering off the rails with even more absurd and pointless detours – not least a lengthy and not even remotely hilarious sub-plot about Ron going blind. Admittedly, a spectacular, cameo-packed, news team brawl almost pulls things together for the finale – but in truth, by that point, the damage has already been done.

Picture: *Anchorman 2* arrives on Blu-ray with an exceptional AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode that is nigh on impossible to fault when it comes to detailing, colour reproduction and black levels. While the movie doesn't offer much in the way of action, the hi-def imagery always makes a real impact – particularly when it comes to all of those loud '80s fashions.

Audio: The Blu-ray's DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack defies expectations. Not only does the mix excel at reproducing dialogue in a clear and natural way, it also proves to be a surprisingly spacious affair with well-rendered positional effects and a punchy LFE



HCC VERDICT

Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues

→ Paramount → Region B BD
→ £25 Approx

WE SAY: A newsworthy BD package for Will Ferrell's latest comedy sequel

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



When there is no news, Ron makes his own

channel. These latter elements help when it comes to providing the acoustics for Chapter 19's news team battle royale, which even throws explosions and laser blasts into the mix.

Extras: As well as the original 118-minute theatrical cut of *Anchorman 2*, this Blu-ray release contains a second platter housing a 143-minute 'Super-Sized Version' promising 763 new jokes. We must admit we didn't bother counting.

Across the two discs you'll also find a fairly irreverent commentary by producer Judd Apatow, writer/director Adam McKay and actors Will Ferrell, Steve Carell, Paul Rudd and David Koechner; eight deleted scenes; 25 deleted/extended scenes; two gag reels; six reels of outtakes; nine clips from the cast read-through of the script; five behind-the-scenes featurettes; three audition clips; three previsualisation clips; six trailers; and Jack Black's *Spoiler Alert* song performed at a charity benefit.

Hey teacher, leave those kids alone!

The Masters of Cinema range schools the competition in how to treat a '60s classic on Blu-ray

→ IF....

The first in Lindsay Anderson's trio of state-of-the-nation satires starring Malcolm McDowell as Mick Travis (the others being 1973's *O Lucky Man!* and 1982's *Britannia Hospital*). *If....* follows the exploits of three nonconformist pupils at the College House public school, whose disaffection eventually boils over into anarchy and violence.

Freely mixing reality and fantasy, Anderson's allegorical masterpiece uses the traditions of the public school system to examine the upper echelons of British society. All of which made it all the more surprising when David Cameron described this classic of counterculture cinema as one of his favourite British films.

Picture: We've no complaints whatsoever about this disc's AVC-encoded 1.66:1 1080p transfer. Colours are robust and well saturated, while blacks are suitably deep, and film grain has been reproduced faithfully. The occasional black and white inserts also hold up well with excellent contrast and clarity. And the print itself appears in wonderful shape, clearly having undergone a serious amount of restoration and remastering. Another hit for the Masters of Cinema stable.

Audio: Eureka provides a restored version of the film's original mono soundtrack on this BD. Understandably, the LPCM 1.0 mix doesn't offer much in the way of dynamic range, but what matters most is that there's no distortion, hiss, dropout or other issues to disrupt the presentation of the dialogue and music.



If.... was Malcolm McDowell's screen debut



Extras: This UK Blu-ray platter clearly outdoes Criterion's celebrated US hi-def release when it comes to extras.

While both releases share a commentary track by film historian David Robinson and actor Malcolm McDowell (recorded separately) and Anderson's 1954 short film *Thursday's Children*, Eureka trumps Criterion with 11 newly-recorded interviews, two US theatrical trailers and two additional Lindsay Anderson shorts – 1952's *Three Installations* and 1955's *Henry*.

As with all Masters of Cinema releases, Eureka's *If....* Blu-ray also comes accompanied by an exclusive booklet. Across its 56 pages you'll find new essays about all three of the Mick Travis films, a new interview with actor Brian Pettifer, smaller pieces about the three shorts included on the disc and – best of all – an archival piece in which Anderson 'interviews' himself about the film.



HCC VERDICT

If....

→ Eureka! Masters of Cinema

→ Region B BD → £23 Approx

WE SAY: A magnificent hi-def outing for this classic of British cinema. David Cameron will be extremely happy...

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Koyaanisqatsi/Powaqqatsi

Arrow Academy → Region B BD
£30 Approx



Consisting mainly of slow-motion footage of cities and landscapes, Godfrey Reggio's non-narrative 'Qatsi' films have always been something of an acquired taste. However, those

who have the taste for Reggio's visual essays exploring the relationship between humanity, nature and technology will be bowled over by this stunningly presented Blu-ray boxset. On top of ensuring that the two films live up to expectations of them being prime AV eye-candy, the lossless audio does wonders for the Philip Glass scores. Extras include interviews, Reggio's 1992 short *Anima Mundi* and an extensive 72-page book of essays.



Nashville

Eureka! Masters of Cinema
Region B BD/R2 DVD → £23 Approx



Robert Altman's sprawling 1975 epic cuts back and forth between 24 characters who keep crossing paths in the home of Country and Western music. Witty, insightful and curiously caustic in its depiction of the music industry and those who gravitate towards it, *Nashville* lacks the immediate pleasure of *M*A*S*H*, but proves equally rewarding when it comes to repeat performances. On top of an authentically grainy AVC 2.35:1 Full HD encode and remixed DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack, this release offers a chat-track, interviews, the trailer, bonus DVD and a new essay about the film.



Sullivan's Travels

Arrow Academy → Region B BD
£23 Approx



This delightful disc is bound to please fans of Preston Sturges' classic Depression-era satire about a Hollywood director who hits the road disguised as a hobo in order to research his next film. Clearly not content with giving us a richly textured AVC 1.37:1 1080p transfer, this platter also packs in plenty of extras. In addition to an assortment of excellent disc-based goodies (including a feature-length documentary about Sturges and a chat-track by Terry Jones) there's also a 40-page booklet loaded with new and archival writing about the movie and its director.



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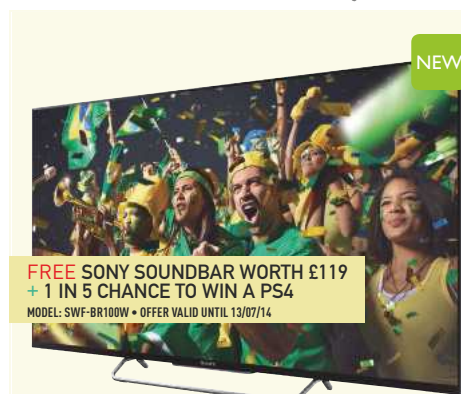
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Outstanding	★★★★★
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TOP 10 TELEVISIONS

All prices are approx and may have changed



NEW ENTRY

Samsung UE65HU8500 → £4,000

★★★★★

Samsung's second-gen 4K flagship sports a curved form factor. Don't fret, though: this is a first-rate (non) flatscreen with colour-rich, lethally-sharp images. The external connections box provides welcome futureproofing. *HCC #234*

**Sony KDL-40W905A** → £1,400 ★★★★★

Faunting the brand's Triluminos edge LED lighting, this set majors on a startling colour performance, plus crisp delineation and authentic black levels. Pricey, but worth it. *HCC #222*

**Panasonic TX-P60ZT65** → £3,800 ★★★★★

This plasma lives up to its 'Beyond Reference' billing, with the best 1080p picture in town – imagery is effortlessly cinematic. But at this price, you might want 4K... *HCC #223*

**Samsung PS64F8500** → £3,000 ★★★★★

A new panel design has given Samsung's plasma tech a much needed injection of brightness and contrast. The result is a premium bigscreen display that constantly wows. *HCC #221*

**Sony KDL-65X9005A** → £5,000 ★★★★★

Sony's first-gen 65in UHD panel is a cracker, offering pin-sharp visuals and brilliant Passive 3D. Blacks aren't best-in-breed, though. *HCC #230*

**Sony KDL-50W829** → £900 ★★★★★

Impressively affordable, Sony's 50in LED stands out courtesy of brilliant motion handling and sharp Full HD imagery. The new 2014 user interface offers a few Smart tricks, too. *HCC #233*

**Panasonic TX-P42GT60** → £1,150 ★★★★★

This mid-range plasma still carries much of the technology found on Panasonic's higher-end PDPs, and delivers finessed, film-friendly Full HD visuals. Not very stylish, though. *HCC #226*



NEW ENTRY

Finlux 50F8075-T → £600 ★★★★★

The best screen we've seen yet from the direct-retail corp, this 50-incher matches its affordability with a great user interface and solid, but not awe-inspiring, HD visuals. *HCC #234*

**Toshiba 84L9363DB** → £7,000 ★★★★★

An 84in 4K screen for only £7,000 – this Tosh is certainly a bargain. Native 4K impresses in terms of clarity and colour punch, but motion and upscaling can be bettered. *HCC #231*



NEW ENTRY

Sony KDL-55W955 → £1,600 ★★★★★

Top of the Japanese giant's 1080p line up, the W955 offers excellent motion handling and great sonics, but is held back by backlight uniformity errors and sluggish operation. *HCC #234*

TECH INFO: TELEVISIONS



Plasma or LCD?: The TV market is increasingly dominated by LED-lit LCD screens that are much, much thinner than traditional cold cathode fluorescent lamp (CCFL) screens. For 42in and above, plasma display panels (PDPs) come into play, although LED screens up to 90ins are also hitting the high street – and 85in 4K panels are also on offer. Plasma screens generally offer superior black levels, better viewing angles and less 3D crosstalk, but less brightness and more energy consumption. There's also a limited choice – only Samsung, LG and Panasonic are selling plasma TVs in the UK, and the latter will soon stop.



Active or Passive: At the beginning of the 3D revolution, most TVs featured the Active system that uses relatively expensive, powered 3D specs to deliver Full HD images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs, which are increasingly common and now sold by LG, Philips, Toshiba, Sony, and Panasonic, have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of Full HD 3D is halved to 540 lines horizontally (but remains at 1,920 vertically). Glasses-free 3D is in its infancy, with just Toshiba's ZL2 on sale.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY MOVIES

**Fast & Furious 6: Extended Action Packed Edition**

This is pure escapism on a cracking BD disc – the car acrobatics and rapid-fire fist-fights are delivered with pin-sharp 2.40:1 visuals and a precision-steered soundmix.

★★★★★

**Pacific Rim 3D**

While the lack of a 7.1 mix is disappointing, Guillermo del Toro's monster mash still delivers demo-worthy hi-def visuals in both its 2D and 3D incarnations. It also comes loaded with fantastic extras.

★★★★★

**Man of Steel 3D**

Looking for a lossless soundtrack that is guaranteed to push your audio setup to its absolute limits? Then do yourself (and your home cinema) a favour and pick up Superman's latest cinematic outing.

★★★★★

**Rush**

This Formula One biopic is simply magnificent, both in terms of production values/performances and its thrilling DTS-HD 5.1 mix. The BD hosts a nice selection of extras, too – an essential disc for petrolheads.

★★★★★

**Gravity 3D**

Alfonso Cuarón's sci-fi flick rewrites the rulebook on movie sound design, and stakes a claim to the 3D crown. A disc you'll return to again and again when you want to test your system – nice extras, too.

★★★★★

Top 10 BLU-RAY PLAYERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

1 Oppo BDP-103EU → £500 ★★★★★
Oppo's first deck for two years was worth waiting for. The universal BDP-103EU features a class-leading build and all manner of bonus goodies, including twin HDMI inputs. AV performance is faultless, and the onscreen menus are superb. A new model, the £600 BDP-103D, adds Darbee Visual Presence processing for you to play with. HCC #215/#228

2 Sony BDP-S790 → £240 ★★★★★
This range-topping deck represents a bargain AV purchase. As well as its 4K upscaling, the Sony delivers BDs and DVDs with aplomb, spins SACDs and offers twin HDMI outputs. HCC #210

3 Oppo BDP-105D → £1,000 ★★★★★
This heavyweight deck builds upon the premium picture performance of the BDP-103D with a wealth of audiophile upgrades – if you're serious about music, check it out. HCC #234

4 Marantz UD7007 → £1,000 ★★★★★
Marantz's top-line player doesn't bother itself with feature fads like 4K upscaling, preferring to offer faultless BD playback, music streaming (including FLAC) and balanced outputs. HCC #220

5 Pioneer BDP-450 → £230 ★★★★★
An affordable universal player, the BDP-450 ignores analogue outputs and concentrates solely on the digital age. Well-built and an assured performer. HCC #219

6 Denon DBT-3313UD → £900 ★★★★★
As a 'transport', this universal deck lacks built-in decoders and analogue outs, but partner it with one of the brand's AVRs via Denon Link HD and you'll be rewarded. HCC #217

7 Panasonic DMP-BDT500 → £300 ★★★★★
Panasonic's range-topper loves your Blu-ray collection. HD images are sharp and fluid and it doubles as a great Smart hub. The touchpad remote is a bit tricky, though. HCC #208

8 Sony BDP-S5100 → £140 ★★★★★
Smaller than many BD decks, Sony's 'Sense of Quartz'-styled spinner offers SACD compatibility and plenty of VOD content. The menu system needs streamlining, though. HCC #222

9 Panasonic DMP-BDT330 → £200 ★★★★★
New for 2013, this slim-line spinner is a solid choice, although the Viera Connect portal is beginning to feel a bit out-dated and the DMP-BDT500 (above) offers better features. HCC #221

10 Pioneer BDP-160 → £130 ★★★★★
The successor to the BDP-150 adds integrated Wi-Fi, making media file playback simpler. The Smart hub is still practically empty, but SACD support softens the blow. HCC #227

TECH INFO: BLU-RAY PLAYERS

Matching your deck to your AV receiver: Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a player, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your AV receiver. If you're still using an older model that doesn't offer HDMI inputs, then you'll need a Blu-ray player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy decoded hi-res surround sound formats. Similarly, older but still HDMI-equipped receivers may not be able to cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one channelling audio to your receiver amp, the other piping video direct to your TV.

What about the PlayStation?: Sony's console still represents an easy path to hi-def heaven. For a low-budget home cinema system, the £200 PS3 Slim (160GB) makes a decent choice – especially if you like playing games (in 3D, if you fancy it). Control via a joystick is a pain, though, and the console runs more noisily than most BD spinners. The recent PS4 is a much better gaming machine, but currently doesn't offer 3D BD (or CD!) playback.



DEMO DELIGHT

Prometheus: Ridley Scott's return to the sci-fi genre is a treat for your senses, with a crystal-clear HD image and spine-tingling sonics. The 3D presentation of this outer-space horror is impressive too – it oozes depth and proves utterly immersive

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TOP 10 PROJECTORS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**Sony VPL-VW500ES** → £8,800

★★★★★

Sony's second-gen 4K projector is around half the price of the VPL-VW1000ES (below) and comes with HDMI 2.0 chipper and Triluminos colour wizardry. Auditioning this class PJ is a no-brainer. *HCC #228*

**JVC X500R** → £5,000 ★★★★★

Armed with a more adept third-generation of the brand's proprietary e-shift technology, the X500R continues JVC's winning ways – contrast rich, sharp and full of tweaks. *HCC #232*

**Sony VPL-VW1000ES** → £17,000 ★★★★★

Sony's flagship projector is an absolute triumph, giving film fanatics the chance to upscale their Blu-ray collection to 4K resolution. The start of a new era? We hope so! *HCC #209*

**SIM2 Super Lumis** → £37,000 ★★★★★

With a more potent lamp than its Lumis forebear, this light-cannon from SIM2 costs an arm and leg, and is only Full HD, but delivers an astonishing level of performance. *HCC #227*

**Epson EH-TW7200** → £1,900 ★★★★★

Priced to appeal to those unable to dabble in the £3,000 market, Epson's mid-ranger is a great purchase. No frame interpolation on offer, but colours, contrast and brightness impress. *HCC #232*

**Sony VPL-HW55ES** → £2,800 ★★★★★

Not one of Sony's 4K models, but this keenly priced Full HD projector delivers where it counts, with solid calibration options, simple setup and brilliant 2D visuals. No 12V trigger. *HCC #230*

**Epson EH-TW9200W** → £3,000 ★★★★★

A brilliant mid-range projector with wireless HD transmission and ISF certification, yet the noise generated when running in 'Normal' lamp mode could be a concern for some. *HCC #231*

**Optoma HD30** → £1,100 ★★★★★

A step up from the HD25 (below), this claims an increased contrast ratio and again offers a pleasing bigscreen performance. UI could be better, and zoom is somewhat limited. *HCC #233*

**Optoma HD25** → £800 ★★★★★

Optoma's projector provides bright, stable Full HD 3D (with the Active glasses and RF transmitter included) and great-looking 2D visuals for a pittance. A bit noisy. *HCC #220*

**BenQ W1070** → £700 ★★★★★

A brilliant bargain proposition, the BenQ W1070 packs a surprising amount of useful features, including ISF certification. You'll need to fork out extra for 3D glasses, though. *HCC #220*

TECH INFO: PROJECTORS



Installation: Although projectors can be temporarily placed on a cupboard, stand or shelf situated at the rear of the room (use the adjustable feet on its base to level the image so that it aligns with the screen), a much better long-term solution is to mount it on your ceiling with an appropriate bracket. Projectors can be quite heavy, though, so it's important to ensure that the bracket is attached firmly – ideally, it should be secured to a joist. Position your PJ so that an imaginary line from its lens to the opposite side of the room hits the screen exactly half-way along its width. The location of your screen should therefore dictate where your projector is. A decent tape-measure or laser pointer will help you to determine the position.

Throw distance: Throw distance specifies the distance between the projector and screen for a focused image of given size. As the vast majority of projectors are equipped with a zoom lens, minimum and maximum throw distances are often specified – say, 3.01m to 6.08m for a 100in. 16:9 image. Shorter throw distances are ideal for smaller rooms, and longer ones for larger rooms. Simple.

Throw ratio: Sometimes, a manufacturer will quote a throw ratio rather than a throw distance. This is basically the throw distance divided by the image width. To get the projected image size, divide the distance between projector and screen by the specified figure. Once again, the inclusion of a zoom lens means that upper and lower figures are usually specified.

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Top 10 SPEAKERS

All prices are approx and may have changed



B&W 683 Theatre 5.1 → £2,750

★★★★★

The first step on the floorstanding ladder in B&W's speaker stable, the revamped 600 Series incorporates new tweeter and bass driver designs and offers absurd value for money. Not the prettiest cabinets, but you really won't care. *HCC #234*



KEF R Series 7.1 → £6,500 ★★★★★

A 7.1 array mixing dipolar and direct surrounds, this authoritative package takes its cues from KEF's Blade concept speaker and offers faultless, largescale home cinema sonics. *HCC #217*



Bowers & Wilkins MT-60D → £2,000 ★★★★★

This 5.1 set sits at the upper end of the sub/sat market, but buyers are rewarded by a potent performance, with the PVID subwoofer dazzling in particular. They look lovely, too. *HCC #212*



Q Acoustics Q2000i → £600 ★★★★★

Another superior sub/sat array from the sonic wizards at Q Acoustics, this marries some surprisingly full-bodied satellite speakers to an easy-to-accommodate 2 x 6in sub. *HCC #211*



Wharfedale Diamond 100 HCP → £950 ★★★★★

Yet another excellent affordable package from Wharfedale, the Diamond 100 HCP offers a sound quality beyond what you might expect from its sub-£1,000 ticket. Maturely styled. *HCC #224*



Kreisel Sound Quattro 7.2 → £8,500 ★★★★★

Mixing two mammoth woofers with some surprisingly manageable multi-tweeter speakers (including TriFX surrounds) this US package is supremely assured. *HCC #232*



Artcoustic Spitfire SL 7.2 → £17,000 ★★★★★

Slimmed-down cabinets now even easier to install on-wall or behind a screen, with a multi-driver design ensuring they're easy to drive to high SPLs. Ideal for dedicated rooms. *HCC #233*



Tannoy Precision Series 5.1 → £4,450 ★★★★★

These speakers' classic look belies the brand's hi-fi heritage, but this multichannel setup works wonders with movies, too – a rich, large and dynamic sound is on offer. *HCC #226*



Monitor Audio Radius R90HTI → £1,500 ★★★★★

The long-loved Radius speakers have been revamped with new drivers and rear ports, and this 5.1 set provides a clear, detailed sound with plenty of heft. Looks good in white, too. *HCC #230*



Roth OLi RA 5.1 → £850 ★★★★★

A floorstanding array with neat design and reassuring build, this value-for-money pack delivers an impressive slice of scale to go with its full-range prowess. *HCC #233*

TECH INFO: SPEAKERS



Centre speaker: Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible. Of course, if you're using a projector screen, it should ideally be placed behind it.

Front speakers: Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

Subwoofer: Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

Surrounds: Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds – it is, in fact, where you should locate the sixth and seventh speakers (rears) in a traditional 7.1 array.

DEMO DELIGHT

Man of Steel: Zack Snyder's reboot is a great BD for proving a speaker package's mettle. Head to the Smallville battle and be dazzled by a 7.1 mix with huge dynamics, incredible bass and remarkable surround steering – the latter most evident when General Zod removes his helmet and is overpowered by swirling, dizzying sounds.

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TOP 10 AV RECEIVERS/AV PROCESSORS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**Sony STR-DA5800ES** → £2,200

★★★★★

Sony's follow up to the STR-DA5700ES continues to pack handy features (built-in Ethernet switching, a unique video-on-demand platform), ups the channels to 9.2, and brings a suite of great post-processing modes. *HCC #223*

**Anthem MRX-510** → £1,700 ★★★★★

The Canadian brand returns in style with an AVR that ignores streaming/networking features but boasts supreme room EQ and eats movie soundtracks for breakfast. *HCC #232*

**Arcam AVR750** → £4,000 ★★★★★

If all you want from an AV receiver is vast power and effortless performance, this high-end 7.1-channel beast is tailored to you. Little bonus features beyond audio networking. *HCC #225*

**Krell Foundation** → £6,500 ★★★★★

One of the US marque's more affordable offerings, the Foundation is a seven-channel processor that delivers an insightful, smooth and epic sound. And it looks fab. *HCC #224*

**Yamaha CX-A5000** → £2,500 ★★★★★

Part of Yamaha's new high-end separates line (you can match it with the MX-A5000 amp), this 11-channel processor sounds clean, precise and offers a dizzying range of features. *HCC #228*

**Marantz AV8801** → £2,500 ★★★★★

The brand's high-end 11-channel processor offers balanced outputs and heavyweight engineering. Partner it with the MM8807 power amp for a supreme performance. *HCC #220*

**Onkyo TX-NR929** → £1,000 ★★★★★

You get a lot for your cash with this 9.2-channel model – built-in Bluetooth and Wi-Fi join THX Select2 certification and excellent connectivity. Creates a large, full-bodied soundstage. *HCC #231*

**Marantz NR1604** → £550 ★★★★★

The third generation of Marantz's slim-line AVR continues its living room-friendly work – easy to operate, fun-sounding, FLAC/Airplay-capable and boasting a great form factor. *HCC #233*

**Pioneer SC-LX87** → £2,000 ★★★★★

A multi-talented 9.2-channel AVR that excels in terms of clarity and scale. Wi-Fi is via a supplied adaptor, and the UI is beginning to look dated compared to the competition. *HCC #230*

**Yamaha RX-V675** → £500 ★★★★★

The low/mid-range RX-V675 digs out all the sonic details of your Blu-ray platters and places them across the soundstage. A great-sounding AVR at a good price. Primitive UI. *HCC #225*

TECH INFO: AV RECEIVERS



Tackling new heights: You may find your AV receiver offering Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, Audyssey DSX or DTS Neo: X post-processing – possibly all three. All of these can deliver two further Front Height channels, with the aim of adding weight and control to the front soundstage, particularly in terms of lifting the centre channel and adding scale to vertical surround effects – rainfall for example. The catch is that you will need to add two new physical speakers, mounted near your ceiling above the regular left and right channel cabinets, and make use of two of the receiver's channels of amplification, which could mean forgoing a second stereo zone or rear surrounds speakers. Note that the Audyssey and DTS modes also cater for Front Wide speakers (pictured above), but this idea seems to be gaining less traction within the industry.

How much power?: Many of the mass-market AV receiver manufacturers are involved in a specifications race to see who can say their model is the most powerful, which can be confusing for consumers. For instance, both Krell's £7,000 S-1500 seven-channel power amp and Yamaha's £500 RX-V675 both claim 7 x 150W – the important part is that Krell's figure is into an eight-ohm load with all channels driven, and that Yamaha's is with one channel into a four-ohm load, which is hardly a real-world situation. The best advice is ignore the numbers game and get a demo of your desired AVR with the same, or similar, speakers that you intend to partner it with.

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Top 10 SUBWOOFERS

All prices are approx
& may have changed**Bowers & Wilkins DB1** → £3,250

★★★★★

Featuring a bipolar arrangement of 12in drivers powered by 1,000W of amplification, B&W's stylish flagship sub is a faultless performer, offering both musicality and sheer muscle. Fit to partner the finest of speakers. *HCC #197*

**SVS SB-2000** → £650 ★★★★★

With a new 12in driver and revamped 500W Sledge DSP amplifier, this mid-sized woofer offers immense value for money and imbibes BDs with potent LFE. Easily recommended. *HCC #233*

**JL Audio Fathom F212** → £5,900 ★★★★★

The US brand arrives in the UK in style – this 2 x 12in, 3,000W brute not only looks gorgeous, it's capable of a mindblowing performance. Got a big room? Get one of these! *HCC #214*

**Tannoy TS2.12** → £550 ★★★★★

The TS2.12 is easily Tannoy's best woofer yet – using a 12in driver (opposite a passive 12in cone) and 500W amp to deliver a rich, bass performance. Affordable and good-looking, too. *HCC #208*

**REL S-5** → £1,600 ★★★★★

A step up from the T series (below), this 12in model is large and weighty, with a performance level to match. Fast and tight but capable of dropping very low indeed. *HCC #234*

**REL T-7** → £650 ★★★★★

The T-7 uses an 8in driver in tandem with a 10in passive radiator, and features simultaneous speaker-level and LFE inputs and Class A/B amplification. An excellent all-rounder. *HCC #223*

**Bowers & Wilkins PVID** → £1,200 ★★★★★

On of the coolest-looking subs on the planet, B&W's revamped PVI uses DSP trickery to craft an opulent low-end performance. The touch-sensitive OLED display is pure class. *HCC #212*

**REL Habitat 1** → £1,300 ★★★★★

With its LongBow wireless system and wall-mountable design, REL's newest woofer is aimed at those seeking discreet bass. Twin 6.5in drivers work fast and with considerable grip. *HCC #231*

**SVS SB12-NSD** → £650 ★★★★★

A 12in driver squeezed into the smallest enclosure possible, the SB12-NSD packs a 400W 'Sledge' amp and offers a weighty yet fast and accurate sound. Looks a bit bland, though. *HCC #223*

**Quadral Qube 10** → £525 ★★★★★

A gorgeous-looking woofer with a build quality that belies its lowly price tag, the Qube 10 takes Quadral's musical heritage and delivers a controlled, poised performance. *HCC #223*

TECH INFO



Why use more than one sub?: Using two subwoofers (or perhaps four) should, in theory, bring huge rewards in terms of bass performance. But remember that LFE is a tricky beast to control. Running two subs may simply double problems in your room like room boom and suck-outs, where outgoing and reflected bass sounds cancel each other out. If you have some flexibility in where you place subwoofers, trial and error may well throw up some interesting results. The acoustics wizard Floyd E Toole (his book *Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms* is fine bedtime reading) suggests one LFE sub to either side of the room may be best for accuracy while placing them in the front corners would be best for overall bass power. Yet there is no hard and fast rule as to what will work best for every room, and you may find that simply using one (large) subwoofer is preferable as it's the easiest to get sounding right.

DEMO DELIGHT

Oblivion: Joseph Kosinski's sophomore sci-fi flick looks spectacular on Blu-ray, and its visual panache is matched by a 7.1 audio mix that particularly impresses with its low-end extension. The subwoofer channel here is regularly employed, dropping deep and loud to accompany everything from explosions and weapons fire to the roaring engines of Tom Cruise's recon ship. Love your lows? Then love this.

Top 5 HD GAMES

**Dead Rising 3**

Killing hundreds of zombies with an outrageous range of weapons is the order of the day in this delightfully demented sequel. Certainly not the best-looking Xbox One title, but probably the most fun

★★★★★

**Forza Motorsport 5**

This game's headline trick is delivering its huge car collection and decent selection of tracks in wonderfully detailed 1080p at a silky smooth 60fps. That it's not quite perfect – dodgy AI, for a start – is less important.

★★★★★

**Grand Theft Auto V**

Rockstar's newest slice of car-jacking, gun-wielding fun is absolutely massive in both scale and ambition – a big-budget game that will leave a big grin on your face. Graphically gorgeous, and the 5.1 mix isn't bad, either.

★★★★★

**Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag**

This sequel takes to the high seas for piratical fun, with an enormous open world, absorbing gameplay, beautiful graphics and a soundtrack packed with well-realised ambient effects.

★★★★★

**Titanfall**

EA redefines the online shooter with this breathtaking arena blaster that ups the ante on the competition with its fluid run-and-gun mechanics, giant mechs you can take control of and gorgeous graphics.

★★★★★

TOP 10 ACCESSORIES

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1 Now TV box → £10 ★★★★★**
 An unqualified bargain, this Wi-Fi VOD streamer from Sky (and built upon Roku hardware) brings BBC iPlayer, Demand 5 and the Roku Channel Store to any HDMI-toting telly, plus subscription access to Sky Movies and Sky Sports. The quality of the adaptive bitrate streaming is impressive, and the £10 tag gets you P&P and an HDMI cable. *HCC #226*
- 2 Sony SRS-X9 → £600 ★★★★★**
 A Wi-Fi, Airplay and Bluetooth speaker with a penchant for hi-res audio, Sony's premium one-box design offers a fine build, quality drivers and a beguiling performance. *HCC #235*
- 3 Devolo dLAN 500 AV Wireless+ → £130 ★★★★★**
 Combining Powerline Ethernet distribution with integrated Wi-Fi, this starter kit is a great purchase if you're looking to extend and simplify your home network. *HCC #222*
- 4 Dune HD Base 3D → £250 ★★★★★**
 A media player for the AV enthusiast. Full-width and fully-featured, it provides support for 3D BD rips and much more, with a slick user interface and plenty of connectivity. *HCC #235*
- 5 Sony MDR-HW700DS → £450 ★★★★★**
 Comfy cans supplied with an HDMI-toting surround processor, enabling multichannel audio to be fed to a virtual 9.1-channel soundstage. The effect is superb – great for late nights. *HCC #234*
- 6 Philips Hue → £180 ★★★★★**
 These Wi-Fi enabled lightbulbs might be expensive (this £180 starter pack includes two, plus the Wi-Fi bridge) but making your own multicoloured lighting scheme is a blast. *HCC #220*
- 7 Philips Screeneo HDP1590 → £1,500 ★★★★★**
 Neatly designed, the Screeneo offers ultra-short throw projection thrills, albeit at 720p (and the DVB tuner is SD). Punchy speakers and networking skills complete a nice package. *HCC #233*
- 8 Roku Streaming Stick → £50 ★★★★★**
 Adopting the same form as Google's Chromecast, this HDMI stick gives full access to Roku's lengthy channel list and enables content sharing from a smartphone. Great for old TVs. *HCC #235*
- 9 Microsoft Xbox One → £430 ★★★★★**
 Not as graphically potent as the PS4 (below) but the new Xbox lives up to its billing as a home entertainment hub – voice control and multi-tasking tricks prove very useful. *HCC #230*
- 10 Sony PlayStation 4 → £350 ★★★★★**
 The PS4 offers a killer gaming experience, with the under-the-hood power resulting in great-looking games. Yet it has a few foibles. Wanna play 3D BDs? You'll be disappointed. *HCC #229*

TECH INFO: MEDIA PLAYERS



What about my TV?: Many flatscreen TVs from the major brands (Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Toshiba and Sharp) also incorporate media player functionality, using Ethernet or Wi-Fi to stream from your home network, or from plugged-in USB drives. Most modern Blu-ray players offer this, too. However, file support is rarely as extensive as on dedicated devices from the likes of Western Digital and A.C. Ryan, and our experience shows some are more adept at playback from USB than over a network. Nor (obviously) is a TV or BD player portable. If your media collection extends beyond JPEGs and MP3s into lossless audio rips and esoteric HD video formats, then a standalone player is a good investment.

Storage: You can, if you really want, store all your files on a plethora of USB drives, or on your PC, but it's best to get a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device for simplified sharing of your media across a network with



multiple players, such as one from Netgear's ReadyNAS range (pictured). These dedicated devices often offer RAID array file backup, and are managed via browser software. Storage capacity can be anything from 1TB to 12TB and beyond.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY BOX SETS

**Game of Thrones: The Complete Third Season**

More fantastic fantasy TV delivered on Blu-ray – as with previous seasons, the AV quality here ensures the show's big-budget bombast shines through.

★★★★★

**True Detective: Season One**

HBO's award-winning eight-part crime series starring Hollywood heavyweights Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson arrives on BD looking great. Essential viewing.

★★★★★

**Universal Classic Monsters: The Essential Collection**

Bag yourself eight great monster movies given a thorough cleanup by Universal Studios – and marvel at the sheer brilliance of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* in 3D.

★★★★★

**James Dean: Ultimate Collector's Edition**

Warner Home Video has given *East of Eden*, *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Giant* 4K restorations from their original camera negatives. The result is that these 1950s classics look fab.

★★★★★

**Doctor Who: The Complete Seventh Series**

Audio commentaries, short episode prequels and featurettes are among the extras on this set collecting 15 episodes of TARDIS-based fun. The 1080i transfers impress, too.

★★★★★

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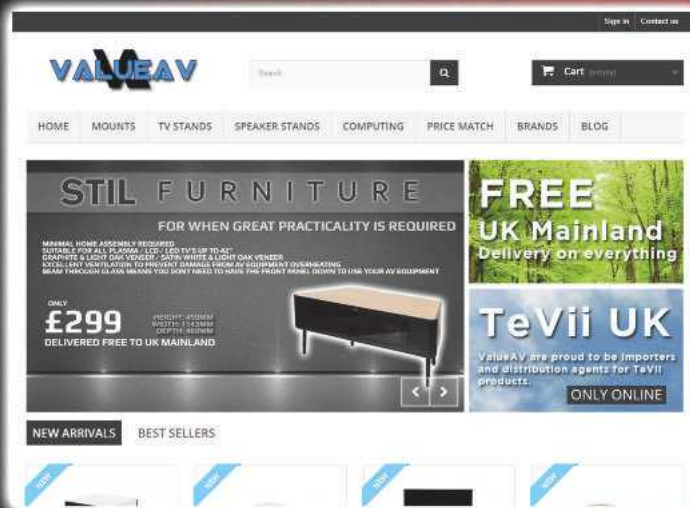


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TOP 5 PVRs

**Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription**

This triple-tuner PVR offers ultimate recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and awesome TiVo functionality. A no brainer if you're in a cable area

★★★★★

**Sky+HD, £subscription**

Sky's channel choice is second-to-none and its twin tuner 2TB PVR is a perfect partner. The recent EPG tweak is welcome and Anytime (the push VOD service) is brilliant for catching up on new movies

★★★★★

**Panasonic DMR-HW220, £250**

Panasonic's PVR mixes a 1TB hard drive with its Smart Viera functionality and media streaming – so at £250 it's an absolute steal, regardless of the uninspired design

★★★★★

**Pure Avalon 300R Connect, 1TB, £350**

Pure's debut Freeview+ HD offering is assured. While it can't match YouView for VOD content, the user interface here is unrivalled and four-way HDMI switching a welcome addition

★★★★★

**Samsung BD-F8500, £300**

This 500GB model marries its Freeview+ PVR to a Wi-Fi-toting 3D Blu-ray player and offers copious catch-up TV options – it's just a shame they aren't integrated into the EPG environment

★★★★★

TOP 5 SOUNDBARS

**Yamaha YAS-103, £230**

Bluetooth-enabled and app-controllable, this single-enclosure solution boasts a great design and solid build. Audio from its 2.1-channel driver array is rich, clean and surprisingly potent

★★★★★

**Canton DM 50, £400**

This sturdily built soundbase speaker may lack HDMI inputs but makes up for it with Bluetooth streaming and a full-bodied 2.1-channel performance. Movies and music benefit from clarity and power

★★★★★

**Monitor Audio ASB-2, £1,000**

This premium proposition marries Monitor Audio's C-CAM drivers with AirPlay and DLNA music streaming. Performance is exemplary – powerful and polished in equal measure

★★★★★

**Philips HTL9100, £600**

A soundbar/sub that incorporates two removable side speakers to allow it to become a wireless 5.1 system, this Philips is a neat proposition. Easy to install and with a heavyweight sound

★★★★★

**Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2, £1,650**

This second-generation soundbar offers no separate subwoofer and is hardly cheap, but B&W's audio expertise shows through, and HDMI hookup aids installation

★★★★★

TOP 5 SYSTEMS

**Panasonic SC-BTT590, £630**

The use of new bamboo/charcoal drivers and noise-shaping tech pays dividends here, with a classy sound quality to match the wealth of features (3D BD, Smart TV and more)

★★★★★

**Samsung HT-H7750WM, £850**

The top-flight system from Samsung in 2014 uses tallboy speakers all around. Plenty of features here, and a fulsome 5.1 performance, but the build quality is a bit disappointing

★★★★★

**Harman/Kardon BDS470, £650**

Harman's 2.1 system eschews 'net TV and streaming features, but majors in heavyweight build quality and solid AV performance. We tested a 2.1 iteration – 5.1 is also available

★★★★★

**LG BH8220B, £650**

With its silver finish, this is a suitable one-box system to partner with LG's flatscreen TVs, with a commendable, if slightly lacking in HF finesse, sound. Additional features including CD-ripping to USB. Handy

★★★★★

**Panasonic SC-HTB570, £350**

A commendable slim-line 2.1 system that can also be clicked together to make a soundbar. The punchy wireless subwoofer does a lot of the work. Bluetooth music streaming is onboard

★★★★★

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July 24

→ IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Battle of the Smart sets – who makes the best connected TV?

31 days without discs – we imagine a streaming-only future

Talking audio with Denon & Marantz

→ ON TEST

Panasonic AS740 LED TV Primare SPA23 amplifier
DALI Rubicon 5.1 speakers Dynaudio Excite 2 system
Multiroom audio group test Panasonic DMP-BDT700 Blu-ray player **PLUS** News, software, opinion, installs and more!

CONTENTS SUBJECT TO CHANGE – BUT ONLY FOR THE BETTER



AV RECEIVERS

ONKYO & YAMAHA: 2014 - 2015 MODELS

ONKYO
TX-NR535
BLACK | SILVER



YAMAHA
RX-V377
BLACK | SILVER

ULTRA 4K HD

AIRPLAY

ONKYO
TX-NR636
BLACK | SILVER



YAMAHA
RX-V477
BLACK | SILVER

HQV UPSCALER

WIFI READY!

ONKYO
TX-NR838
BLACK | SILVER



YAMAHA
RX-V677
BLACK | SILVER

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DROP CINEMA SCREEN
6 FT TO 10 FT



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4K RESOLUTION



EPSON EH-TW6100
HD PROJECTOR



EPSON EH-TW9200-W
HD PROJECTOR



SONY VP-VW500
HD PROJECTOR

5.1 SPEAKER PACKAGES

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FINANCE
AVAILABLE

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WINNER

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FINANCE
AVAILABLE

TANNOY MERCURY
V4i AV 5.1
MAPLE | DARK WALNUT



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

TRADITIONAL STYLE
PURE PERFORMANCE

5.1 SPEAKER PACKAGES

SURROUND SOUND: THE MONITOR AUDIO WAY

MONITOR AUDIO
RADIUS R90 HT1
BLACK | WHITE | WALNUT



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

COMPACT YET
POWERFUL

MONITOR AUDIO
SILVER 6 AV12
2 GLOSS | 4 VENEER FINISHES



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

PURE PERFORMANCE
NO COMPROMISE

MONITOR AUDIO
MASS 5.1
WHITE | BLACK



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FINANCE
AVAILABLE

BEST FOR
BUDGET

TV STANDS

HOUSE YOUR KIT WITH CLASS

JUST RACKS JRL-1101
WHITE | BLACK



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

PERFECT FOR
SOUNDBARS!

ALPHASON FINETWOODS
OAK | WALNUT | BLACK



TV BRACKET
OPTION

SPECTRAL SCALA
ANY COLOUR YOU LIKE!



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AVAILABLE

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MODIFICATIONS



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GLOSS BLACK



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SIX COLOUR FINISHES



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ANY COLOUR YOU LIKE!

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BAMBOO | 3 FINISHES

SPECTRAL HIGH END
CLEAR | FROSTED | BLACK



ATACAMA ELITE ECO
BAMBOO | 3 FINISHES



SPECTRAL CD SHELVING
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OR
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0%

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MUSIC AS IT'S MEANT TO BE HEARD

**ROKSAN CASPIAN
M2 CD & AMPLIFIER**
BLACK | SILVER

WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND STYLE
★★★★★
OCT 2013



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND STYLE
★★★★★
DEC 2011

**ROKSAN KANDY,
K2 CD & AMPLIFIER**
BLACK | SILVER

**AUDIOLAB 8200 CD,
PRE-AMP & MONO AMPS**
BLACK | SILVER



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND STYLE
★★★★★
AWARDS 2010

**YAMAHA AS-500
AMPLIFIER**
BLACK | SILVER

**MARANTZ 6005
CD & AMPLIFIER**
BLACK | SILVER

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND STYLE
★★★★★
MAY 2014



**YAMAHA A-N500
CD & AMPLIFIER** NEW
BLACK | SILVER

HI-FI SPEAKERS

THE LATEST AND GREATEST PAIRS OF LOUDSPEAKERS

**Q ACOUSTICS
CONCEPT 40** NEW
BLACK | WHITE

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND STYLE
★★★★★
MAY 2014

AWARD-WINNING
'CONCEPT'
DESIGN



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE



0%
FINANCE
AVAILABLE

**MONITOR AUDIO
SILVER 10** NEW
2 GLOSS
4 VENEER FINISHES

BEST FOR
LARGE ROOMS

**WHARFEDALE
DIAMOND 121**
3 FINISHES

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND STYLE
★★★★★
OCT 2013



DALI ZENSOR 1
3 FINISHES

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND STYLE
★★★★★
AUGUST 2011

CABLES & INTERCONNECTS

THE CONNECTION IS MADE

**QED REFERENCE
AUDIO 40** NEW
STEREO PHONO
RCA CABLE PAIR

RE-DESIGNED
PLUGS



**AUDIOQUEST
FLX-SLIP 14/4**
SPEAKER CABLE

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND STYLE
★★★★★
NOV 2012

WHAT HI-FI?
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AWARDS 2013

**AUDIOQUEST
CINNAMON**
HDMI CABLE

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND STYLE
★★★★★
NOV 2012

WHAT HI-FI?
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★★★★★
AWARDS 2012

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**WIREWORLD
STARLIGHT**
HDMI CABLE

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND STYLE
★★★★★
NOV 2012

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AWARDS 2012

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WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND STYLE
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AWARDS 2012

WIRELESS SPEAKERS

NO COMPLICATION, UTTERLY SIMPLE TO ENJOY

DALI KUBIK NEW
RED | WHITE | BLACK



WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND STYLE
★★★★★
MAY 2014

Q ACOUSTICS BT-3 NEW
RED | WHITE | BLACK



WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND STYLE
★★★★★
MAY 2014

**MONITOR AUDIO
S300**
WHITE | BLACK



WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND STYLE
★★★★★
MAY 2014



DENON ENVAYA NEW
WHITE | BLACK



**GENEVA LABS
MODEL S**
RED | WHITE | BLACK



**BANG & OLUFSEN
BEOLIT12**
GREY | DARK GREY

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SURGE PROTECTOR**
8-WAY



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ACOUSTIC FILL**
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AUDIO

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LAPTOP LISTENING



**MIGHTY MATE MM1
SMARTPHONE MOUNTS**
BLACK | WHITE



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POINT OF VIEW

Richard Stevenson wonders if the electronics industry has developed an unhealthy obsession with music at the expense of movies

IS MUSIC THE new movie? Onkyo, the doyen of the AVR market for the last few years, has just announced it is partnering with 7digital to launch a hi-res music download store. Not a specialist site for downloading 4K movies. Not even HD movies. Not even classic film remasters or TV series. No, Onkyo is backing music as the digital entertainment medium of choice for the masses.

I sense a similar drive amongst other mainstream AV equipment makers. The likes of Pioneer and Denon continue to push into streaming audio, Bluetooth systems and headphones – how long before they aren't playing the game with AVRs and Blu-ray players? At the same time, Panasonic has dropped plasma and Sony has launched its High-Res Audio product range that is intrinsically linked to its own music content download site.

As you must know by now, soundbars will be the biggest selling audio product in the UK by miles this year. Market analysts reckon we will buy over 1m of them. I would hazard a guess that is something like ten times the number of AVRs that have been sold in the UK in total, ever. And the prime features of better-spec soundbars, other than addressing the appalling sound of modern TVs of course, is their connectivity to music devices. **Be it by dock, cable, Bluetooth, AirPlay or over a network, the headline features of soundbars are music-related.**

Bothered by bends

It's a good job, then, that TV brands are driving home cinema forward. Oh, hang on – they aren't. I grant you that 4K is tickling my fancy, but curved screens? That makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. We have spent years wanting TVs flat and slim so they sit flush on the wall, which curved

screens don't. The biggest selling point of plasma/LCD screens over CRT was that they were flat, which cut down on reflections. Curved screens are fantastic at reflecting almost every piece of light, from kit LEDs to the Aurora Borealis on a clear night.

There is some logic to the curve radius making each pixel the same distance from your eyes. However, you need to be sitting precisely at the apex of the curve radius (4.2m from the screen for Samsung, if you were wondering) and absolutely perpendicular to the display to benefit. So that is the rest of the family out of luck, then. I am firmly of the belief that curved TV screens are a pointless marketing gimmick.

And to top it all, Apple goes and buys Beats Electronics for a squillion dollars, meaning the next time Dr Dre raps about putting a 'cap' in someone's 'ass' it will probably be solid diamond. I digress. That is one of the biggest electronics and digital entertainment companies in the world investing the entire GDP of Barbados in a brand that is all about music. What sort of AV company, or even AV companies, could that figure have bought, I wonder?

The world has gone music mad. This is a good thing, and manufacturers are scrabbling onto bandwagons to get a piece of the new music pie. But what of home cinema, that heady mix of high-performance sound and vision? It's being left behind by manufacturers in favour of new digital music products and services. They don't really give a hoot about home cinema and proper AV anymore. In fact, I would be surprised if any mainstream electronics brand had a business plan that featured AV equipment in three years' time. Come on manufacturers, get in touch, and tell me I'm wrong ■

Are you listening to more music than ever on your AV setup? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Richard Stevenson is going to embark on a new career as a rap artist, as soon as he can find a phrase that rhymes with '2:2 pulldown'



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